

HEARTLAND SONSHINE
A Thriving Rural Church and Community

Submitted to Dr. Dale Patrick
Religion Department,
Drake University, Des Moines, IA

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by Rod Routon,
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HEARTLAND SONSHINE

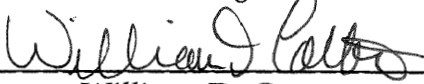
A Thriving Rural Church and Community

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Heartland Sonshine -- A Thriving Rural Church and Community

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A big thank you to my wife Barbara and to all my family. Without their prayer, encouragement and help this would not have been possible. While working on this they have had to flex often to accommodate me and have been very patient, receiving much less attention and help from me. Thank you Gary and Deb Routon for your help proof reading.

The faith family of Bangor Liberty Friends Church and Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends have been instrumental in providing this opportunity for me. The gracious gift of time given allowing for travel, research and writing is much appreciated. Many from this caring group have ministered to me and have submitted some of the material making this project more ample.

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To Jo Bates and all the volunteers who so tirelessly give of themselves to keep the library in Union, Iowa open and a center from which to gather resources a big thank you from all the heartland.

I appreciate the Drake University faculty/advisoral committee who gave much time going over drafts and consulting with me. A big thank you to the patience, the input and the prodding of Dr. Dale Patrick, Professor Russ Seger and Pastor William Cotton.

Thank you to rural cartoonist Don Fitzgerald who, even after suffering a stroke, continues to commit his talents to the energizing of rural newspapers and communities and who graciously helped me when one of my rough draft readers said: "I can't read this, it don't have any pictures!" Thanks for the pictures and the smiles Don! A big thank you to the other contributing illustrators: John McPherson, cartoonist and the people at The Progressive Farmer.

To the beautiful view out my office windows opening up my panorama to the wonder of the rural heartland I am much appreciative. It is this heartland that has drawn my great grandfathers like a magnet from their migration and which holds me gently in its embrace.

INTRODUCTION

I was born and raised in the heartland. My parents are rural Quaker ministers and my great grandfather was a homesteading farmer and circuit-riding minister in western Kansas. My wife and I have served our Lord as full-time Friends, (Quaker), ministers for more than 22 years in rural settings as well as in the cross cultural contexts of the inner-city of Philadelphia, with the Navajo at the Friends work in Rough Rock, Arizona and in the church planting mission of Evangelical Friends in Mexico City.

Currently I have been serving as co-pastor with my wife Barb at Bangor Liberty Friends Church in rural Iowa for more than 10 years.

While serving in one of the world's largest and busiest cities, Mexico City, I had been trained in urban church planting. Returning to minister in a rural scene, though very familiar to me from my childhood, I wanted current research and material that would help. I was surprised with all the specialization today to find very little available data. In fact several seminars I went to were obviously geared to the popular suburban church growth models. One of these conference leaders spoke matter of fact that many of the measures suggested would not work in a depopulating rural area. Then he made the bold statement that if pastors wanted to be in a growing church they should leave the dying country churches and apply the church growth model he was presenting in a growing, populated area.

Another seminar I went to after returning to the U.S. in the mid-eighties spent most of the time promoting telemarketing for church growth. Today, in the nineties, how do we feel about receiving intrusive calls interrupting our focus from important projects or from family time at supper trying to sell us something?

Research will be presented in this project demonstrating that few denominations, seminars and continuing education opportunities for ministers take the rural church seriously. Rural people are underserved by our governmental agencies and they are generally overlooked by organizational programs, including those of the church. Chapters one and seven, particularly, will show how and why this happens and suggest some solutions.

In my own search to retool and to sharpen my ministerial skills the people of Bangor Liberty Friends allowed me to enter a study track at Drake University. There I studied in the graduate religion, counseling and business/administration departments. Still, wanting to do research in rural ministry I chose this thesis project. It has been a stretching experience for me. This project has also been chosen with the hope that it will be a help to Bangor Liberty Friends where I pastor and to the greater Friends body. As well, I hope that it will be helpful for those who live and minister in rural areas and who are doing heartland research.

I spent more than two years researching the field of rural ministry to gather materials for this project. In the course of my research in the spring of 1995, I went to the annual Rural Minister's Conference in Dubuque IA. There, Tex Sample, author, professor and spokesperson for rural people and for rural ministry opened our sessions sharing from John 1:14. When I heard that text I knew in my heart it was to be the theme for this project and for my rural ministry: "The Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth." The ministry of our Lord Jesus was with people, on their level, in interpersonal dialogue which changed lives and brought people together in communion and built community. This is the heart of Jesus' ministry and the focus of this project which will be discussed more in chapter two.

It was the intentional endeavor of early Quakers in the 1600s to reach out to others on their level as Friends sharing the living Word in interpersonal communion that spawned the early growth of our group. When working against slavery John Woolman, a Quaker, committed more than 30 years of his life to travel and visit slave holders personally. He asked questions maintaining an open, level dialogue: "What does the owning of slaves do to you as a moral person? What kind of institution are you binding over to your children? Man by man, inch by inch, Woolman went visiting and pressing his gentle arguments until by 1770, one hundred years before the Civil War, history records, no Quakers held slaves" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 29, 30).

It was this same commitment to an interpersonal ministry that kept my great grandfather traveling by horseback, visiting people, building rural churches, schools and communities on the western Kansas prairie. It was this same commitment to visitation and intentional community building that I grew up in.

At the Rural Minister's Conference I was able to purchase the main text and some of the other material used by the Wartburg and University of Dubuque Theological Seminaries for their rural ministry program which is becoming well recognized. To those authors, Mary A. Agria, Rural Development Specialist, and L. Shannon Jung, Director of the Center for Theology and Land, I am much appreciative.

Another invaluable source to my project is Lyle Schaller's study that encompasses 30 years of research on the rural church to which I am deeply indebted. Contributing authors to that study are J. Kenneth Benson, John S. Holik and Edward W. Hassinger who was kind enough in one of my initial interviews to give me a copy of the study which was out of print. Edward Hassinger is a professor in the Department of Rural Sociology at Missouri University.

The chorus composed of rural authors, speakers and studies in concert together in this presentation is unusual to find elsewhere. I encourage readers, rural/small town pastors, church and community leaders to acquire the materials presented in this project. Data to do so will be found in the resource and reference sections in the back. It is not possible, however, to find them in one place all singing together as you will find here. There will be times in their concert when different members of the chorus will perform longer pieces solo. The longer solo pieces are presented because of the singer's powerful interpretation of the Composer. Some of their notes are sad, some of them are jarring, some of them will leave us hopeful and enlivened to join with them in song. You are encouraged to join with the chorus. There will be certain refrains, repeated, which you will come to know and can sing along, if you choose, as we progress in concert. It is the desire of all the members of this chorus that you share our song of hope for the future in the heartland where you *dwell*.

Though rural sociologists and their studies will be cited this is not just a neutral third party presentation. This project will contain, as well, observations, feelings, stories and rural language from myself and other people who live in the heartland. This thesis presents a blend from the Word, from experience and from research. The focus of this presentation emphasizes the importance of personally connecting with people and participating with them in an intentional effort, which if committed to, builds a thriving rural church and community.

What is a thriving rural church and community? This project will picture the difference between those rural churches and communities that are merely surviving, those that are dying and those that are thriving and why. The outline of this thesis presents a thriving rural church and community as one where people are: (1) Dwelling in the Heartland, (2) Nurturing Life in the Heartland,

(3) Responding from the Heartland, (4) Networking in the Heartland, (5) Making Decisions and Managing Organizations in the Heartland, (6) Developing an Intergenerational Community in the Heartland and (7) Making a Commitment From, For and To the Heartland.

Chapter one pictures what has been and is currently happening in rural America. It describes the struggles, losses and trends. It also demonstrates, despite difficulties, that there is life thriving in rural America. After stating some of the problems in chapter one, chapter two meditates on the phenomenological aspect of the wonder of the Word at work in our world. The scriptural genesis for a thriving church and community are established in chapter two. Biblical references generally are from the New American Standard Version. Chapters three through seven of the project move from the mystical to the practical to build on the base established by the Word, using research and experience to model a thriving rural church and community.

The format and progression of this project follow the pattern of Friends worship and of Quaker life. Presenting the concerns we live with, we come into a deep communion with our living Lord sharing together as Friends, finding light and life which we, then, endeavor to take and demonstrate in practical ways to enliven our community and world.

This project certainly is not exhaustive, rather it is just a start. There is much more information that needs to be gathered and presented to help fill the vacuum that still exists in the area of rural church and community research. As you read this I invite you to share your ideas, observations and experiences with others and with me for the building up of the rural church and community. Let us commit ourselves together for the hope of the next generation in the heartland.

You can contact me where I am in residence and service for Friends at the following rural route:

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CHAPTER ONE

DWELLING IN THE HEARTLAND

Fairville, Bloomfield, Fairfield, Belle Plaine, Pleasant Plain, Union, Clemons Grove, What Cheer, the Rose Capitol, Greensburg and Garden City are, along with the rolling, fertile fields between them and around them that stretch to the wide horizon, part of the Heartland.

They, clustering under a wide sky, reduce in the mind's eye to single, complex structures. Traceries of streets, and even more of contact and consciousness, run among the people and their places.

The cusp of trees on the horizon, the water tower, the elevator, these are the places in the Midwest. The limestone hills, the loess bluffs, the forest lakes and sand dunes, the rills and knobs and kettles are a Place of Sense (Martone, 1988, p. 29, 66).

As you and I come to a Place of Sense here in the heartland and as we begin to travel together we will start by: 1) Taking a Heartland Tour and Looking at the Trends; 2) Taking a Heartland Tour and Looking at Some Problems; 3) Taking a Look at some of the Misconceptions about Dwelling in the Heartland, and; 4) Seeing Signs of Life, Thriving in the Heartland.

TAKING A HEARTLAND TOUR AND LOOKING AT THE TRENDS

Welcome to a tour of the heartland of America! As we start our tour together let me say right from the beginning that a thriving rural church and community is one where people are dwelling in the heartland. Dwelling refers to living in the heartland but goes much deeper and spreads out further than just maintaining a residence in a rural area. In the up-coming sites we will see and study together,

examples will be shown of heartland dwelling. For now, a thriving rural church and community is one where people are dwelling, where they are participating in and committed to nurturing life in the heartland.

Thriving refers to something that is not dead or dying but alive! As we travel along together we are going to see examples of thriving life in the heartland. Thriving goes much deeper and spreads out much further than just living. There are many plants, animals, people and organizations that are alive but that are not thriving. As we travel, more definition will be given to the concept of thriving. Living examples will be presented demonstrating the difference between organizations that are dying, those that are merely surviving and those that are thriving. For the present, thriving has to do with plants, animals, people and organizations that have the spark of life and that are reproducing that spark into a new generation.

The thriving church and community we will see and study on this tour are integrated. It is not church or community; it is not church and community; "it is both church and community; it is church-in-community" (Allen, 1996). A thriving community will have a faith center or centers from which spring living, transforming fellowship. A thriving church will be participating in community. In the thriving examples of church and community we will see on this tour it will be very difficult to determine any dividing line between the two if there is any at all. This will no doubt frustrate some who are accustomed to clearly demarked lines between church and community. Watch as we go along and let me know what you think as we go.

As beautiful as the heartland is, to start our tour together, we will take an honest look at real life in the rural scene. You can see, if you will, that things are not

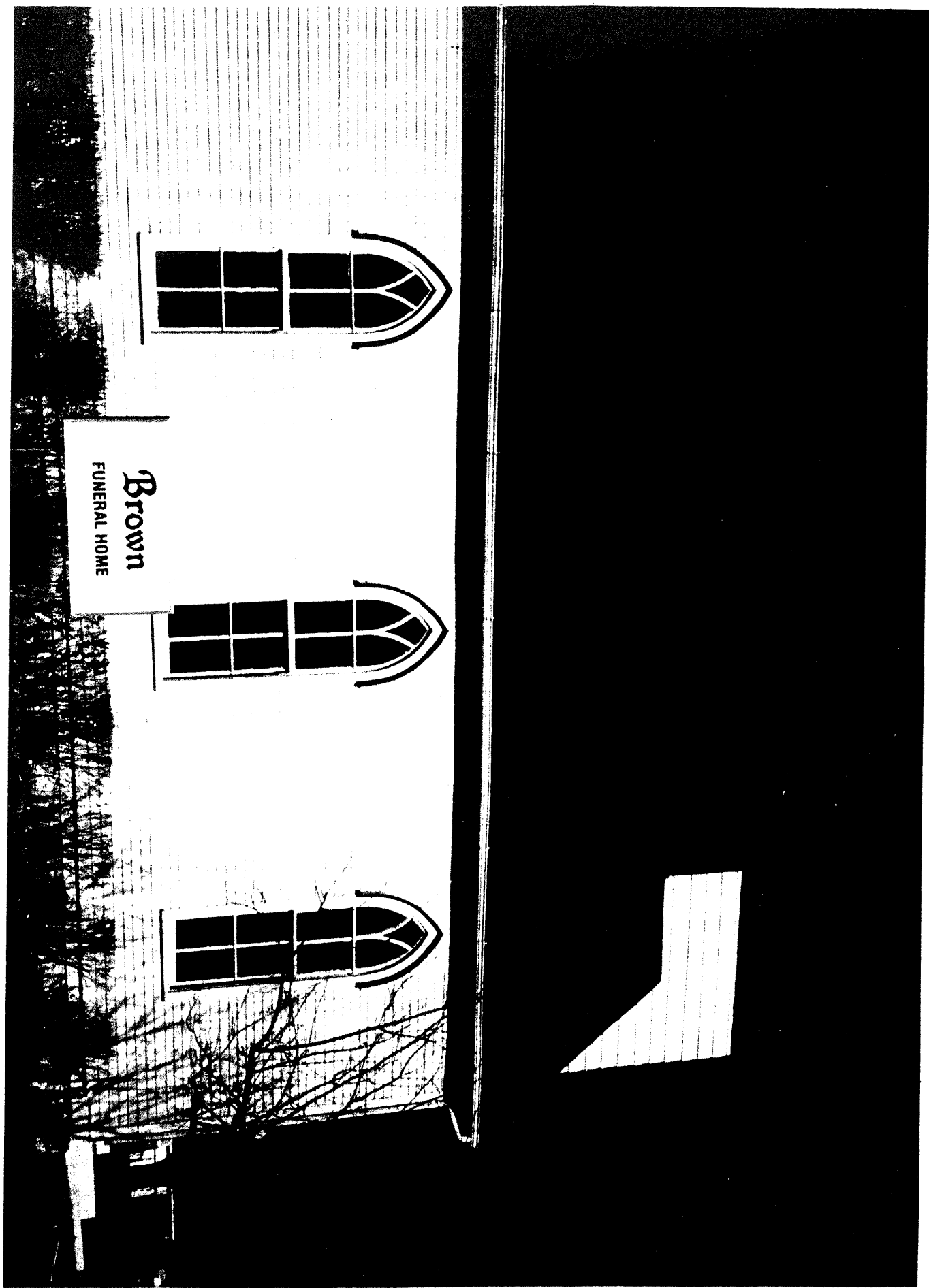
going very well in much of the heartland. As we look one can obviously note the rural depopulation. There are fewer people dwelling, at home, here in the heartland.

As we travel the rural Heartland Road and pass the small, white Heartland Friends Church standing proudly, you will notice on your right the gutted out home which has just burnt down. Commenting on the fire with a neighbor, he said: "Yes, it's sad, all these empty farm houses being destroyed." "Destroyed," I said, "I thought that it just caught fire." "No," he continued, "the value of the house pushes up the property taxes. It's continually harder for the land owner to pay taxes for a house that can not generate any income. Because of the out migration from rural areas the land owner simply has to burn the house down."

The number of farms that ranged between 100 and 179 acres--the traditional family farm--dropped from 1,438,000 in 1935 to 773,000 in 1959, to fewer than 350,000 in 1986. The number of people living on farms dropped from 30.2 million in 1940 to 23 million in 1950, to 15.6 million in 1960, to 9.7 million in 1970, to 7.2 million in 1980, to approximately 5 million in 1986. Fewer farmers meant fewer customers for local merchants and fewer members for rural churches (Schaller, 1988, p. 6).

As we continue on our tour, west of I-35 on county road E-18 in central Iowa we can see a lovely rural church that has been renovated and looks as good as the day it was built. It sits surrounded by pine trees with its proud steeple pointing to heaven, but, notice, on closer inspection you can see that the sign out front now reads: "Brown Wood Funeral Home." Many other rural churches that once brought people together in community and in communion are now gone, and nothing has filled the empty vacuum that has been left.

Just a few miles away as we travel together is a rural Friends (Quaker) church/meeting that you can see is constructed of brick and still stands strong. Regular services are no longer held there. It does serve as a community center for some limited functions. As we go inside, up the short flight of stairs and turn left



Brown
FUNERAL HOME

through this door which leads into the overflow area for the sanctuary you can see some of the antique books, records, and pictures of this Quaker meeting. Notice, too, the mannequins displaying traditional Quaker dress, so that we can observe the Quaker life style of the time. This Quaker church/meeting has been registered with the historical society, and so, has become a Quaker museum. We might ask ourselves as we observe and travel together, funeral homes, historic places, museum pieces, is this to be the fate of the rural church? (Schaller, 1988, p. 23).

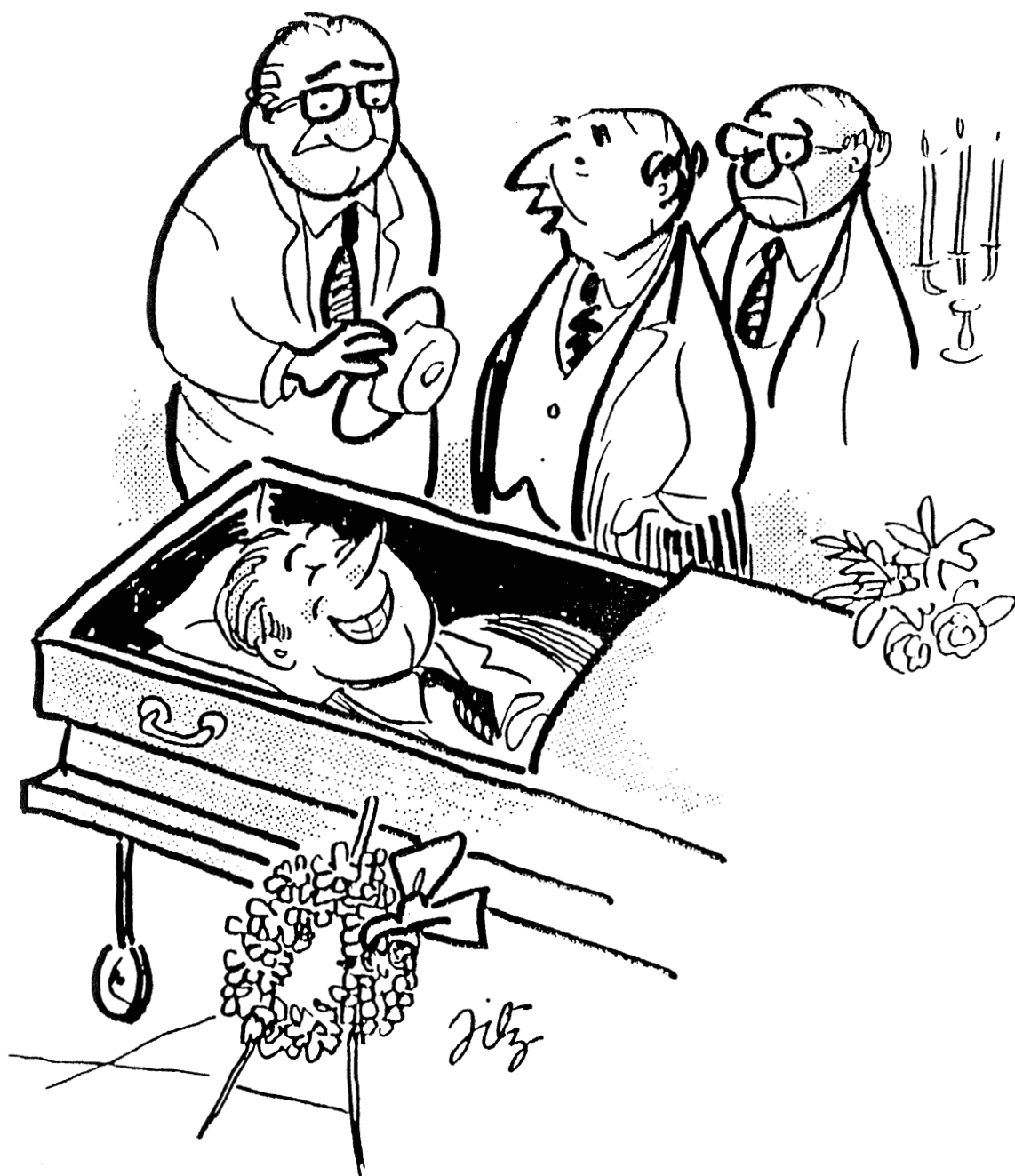
The schools which were once a part of these rural communities are gone. Corn grows where students used to learn and play and draw their parents to programs. Rural children now go to consolidated schools traveling well over 20 miles one way to school. There are many advantages to this as far as variety and availability of programming, but it means that rural parents must sacrifice and dedicate much time for travel to stay actively involved in our children's education.

The Rural Church, Learning From Three Decades of Change, edited by Lyle E. Schaller, based on 30 years of research, gives detailed data displaying the depopulating trends in rural America.

The study is based on 99 rural townships selected randomly from villages of less than 2,500 population, where 55% were in the open country, including 515 churches. Of these, 32.4% had under 50 members, 28.8% had from 50-99 members, and 38.9 had 100 or more members. The income of these rural congregations was low:

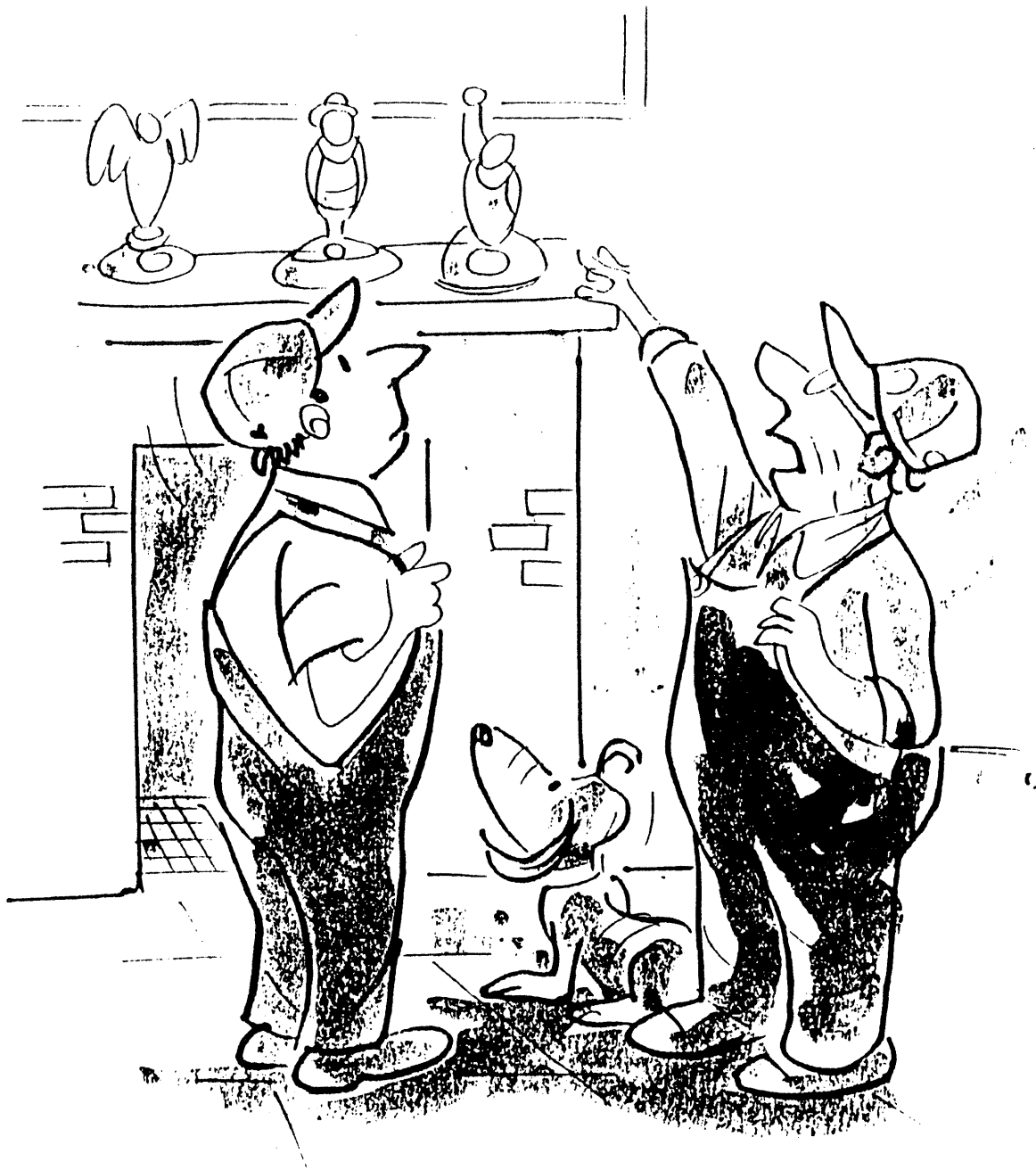
Almost 80% had receipts under \$30,000 annually, and only 3% had annual receipts of \$100,000 or more. During that 30-year period, 130 congregations in those 99 townships ceased to exist (Schaller, 1988, p. 40-47).

Thinking seriously about rural churches, these percentage points prompt the crucial question from Schaller, "Can they survive?"



**"Yes, he looks good, alright. I think he has wanted out
of farming for some time!"**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)



In 1963, I won a trophy for my terracing program. In 1976, I won a trophy for being named the star farmer of this county. This year I won a trophy for surviving.

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

Tex Sample, spokesman for rural people and for rural ministry shares the major concern of rural congregations and communities is "about their future" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 161).

A letter of concern was sent out in 1992 from the Friends United Meeting Office to all the Friends Meetings under that umbrella in the Midwest and in North Carolina. The letter states, summarizing a study done: "North American Friends are basically rural, declining in membership, and aging. We must address these issues before it is too late" (Hadley, 1992).

The 1990 census for Iowa shows all rural counties continue to lose population. The two central Iowa counties from which our church, Bangor Liberty Friends, is formed are Hardin and Marshall. In the census those two counties continued to show a loss of, "12.3%," and "8.1%," respectively (Register, 1991, p. 4).

Data published in the April, 1995 issue of Farming Manual shows nationally "farm numbers are continuing to shrink at the rate of 32,500 per year" (Farm Numbers Still Shrinking. 1995, p. 12).

TAKING A HEARTLAND TOUR AND LOOKING AT SOME OF THE PROBLEMS

As we continue our tour together we can see, if we will, the trends which we have observed are caused by several heartland problems. Some of the problems that will be the focus of our tour are: Inattention to rural needs by governmental and organizational bodies; rural poverty; isolation; brain drain; pastoral retention and the closure of churches, to name a few.



**He's been standing there all day . . . sifting through each load
and muttering that "his share is looking real good!"**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)



**We're from the Department of Agriculture in Washington and
we've come to help cook your goose for Christmas!**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

One of the biggest problems in the heartland is when it comes to governmental aid, "communities of 50,000 or less tend to fall off the bottom of the charts" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 27). Yet these forgotten people bravely struggling for survival in the rural areas are "both impacted by and impact the larger society around them" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 44).

The Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved in a rural study echoes Agria and Jung in their charge against governmental agencies overlooking underserved rural populations. "There is limited access of rural people and children to educational and economic opportunities and to health care. Rural people and their children are ignored in national policy making" (Dorsey & Sabol, 1991, p. 76).

The concern expressed by the above research in 1991 and in 1994 continues. I am going to take the liberty to quote at length from various sources with the intent to help the reader see the extent of the problem of the overlooked and underserved rural population.

In a recent study published in the Spring of 1996 by more than 20 scholars at the Social and Behavioral Research Center for Rural Health at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa it is stated:

The segment of rural population is widely ignored. In general, the mental health problems reported during the farm crisis of the 1980s have dissipated but now there are new factors causing stress. There's a whole restructuring of the rural economy forced by the meat packing, poultry and grain marketing industries. Recent studies show that men in small towns and rural populations are twice as likely as women to suffer from depression -- a situation that is just the opposite of what city dwellers report. Rural children and adolescents are vulnerable too. Rural youths' alcohol use has approached that of inner city, urban dwellers. The researchers said that there is such a demand for the limited number of mental health services that providers are swamped. There is a long waiting list to even see a counselor. Rural areas are **badly underserved**. It is an audibility gap. Rural folks are not heard (O'Donnell, 1996, p. 1 & 6M).

Newsweek, August, 1988, called rural areas, "America's Third World," stating:

Poverty in the country side now exceeds that in the nation's big cities. When Americans think about poverty, most conjure up familiar city scenes: Welfare moms in tenements, jobless men under street lamps, wasted kids on crack. Those powerful images belie the fact that in the nation's urban areas poverty rates are actually falling. Lost in the shadows are 9.7 million impoverished rural Americans; they constitute 18.1 percent of the 57 million people who live outside metropolitan areas. A much smaller group of the destitute -- the homeless -- receive far greater attention, while this disturbing, widely dispersed underclass, call it America's Third World, rarely intersects with the rest of society. It is a world caught in chronic recession and in which violence--particularly family violence--is commonplace. It is a world of drifters, rusting mobile homes, marginal medical care, cheap liquor, and terrible nutrition. And it is a world in which conditions are deteriorating at an alarming rate (McCormick, 1988).

Robert Wolf, writer and publisher, speaking for rural people in the Des Moines Register of July, 1995, echoed the Newsweek lead:

Typically a Third World country has natural resources and human labor that it sells for a pittance, resources and labor that others want at bargain prices. Iowa exports its produce and livestock and in exchange receives a pittance. That is, the family farmer does. The profits from the small farmer's produce, stock and hard work go to someone else, usually out of state. The corporate farmer makes good money. But the owners of the corporate farms, usually, live out of state in some metropolitan center. Thus the profits made from family and corporate Iowa farms flow across its borders.

Another situation develops in Third World countries when the industrial methods of developed cultures disrupt the traditional way of life in the undeveloped culture -- colonization.

Likewise, Iowans continue to leave Iowa for opportunity elsewhere. Iowa's most valuable exports, more important than their grain and livestock, their high-school and college graduates, can not afford to stay.

The colonizer's economy takes away the native's self-sufficiency in a local economy and replaces it with dependence on the colonizer's economy. Control of their own lives is no longer in the hands of the locals.

That's Iowa's situation, and the situation of every other rural area in this nation, where local and regional economies have been destroyed. Meanwhile no one in Washington seems particularly concerned about the state of the Third World within its own borders.

From the urbanite's point of view, there probably is no reason to keep rural America alive. Most urbanites don't know where their food comes from and don't much care. It makes no difference to them whether their food is grown on a family farm or a corporate farm. The final product is all that interests them (Wolf, 1995, p. 1C).

Bolstad, a prolific writer and crusader for the rural cause asks the question, "Is there a future for family farming in America?" (Bolstad, 1989, p. 6). Russ Schwebke, a Wisconsin farmer lost his farm and could not afford to feed his son. He fought humiliation and loneliness. At times he could not afford fuel for his house and on the coldest nights slept in the barn warmed only by the animals (Bolstad, 1990, p. 7).

Bolstad continues as he reports the sad decline of quality health care in rural America:

In western Wisconsin there are areas where there are fewer than one doctor to 3,500 people. The U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging estimates that 600 rural hospitals will close in the next ten years. Right now, over 500 rural counties in this country are not served by hospitals of any kind. When the absence of adequate health care in rural communities is combined with the health hazards and accident rates endemic to farming, you get a truly frightening picture (Bolstad, 1990, p. 10).

The "World Vision" magazine, in 1990, reported:

The rural United States is a land of no exits, a prison without bars. In Texas, 25 million gallons of raw sewage are pumped daily into the Rio Grande river, the only water available to many rural poor people who live in cardboard shacks near its banks, and who have to drink it, bathe in it and wash their clothes in it.

In Tennessee there are rural families that live with no electricity, running water, or indoor plumbing, where thousands live on dirt floors, and where over half of the students drop out of high school. Twenty-five thousand rural Ohioans have no indoor plumbing.

In the 32 poorest rural counties, child mortality rates are 45% higher than the national average, a child survival rate comparable to Panama's. Of the children who do survive, 25% live below the U.S. government's official poverty line (Waterhouse, 1990, p. 3).

Many rural people live in conditions which would never be tolerated in inner city or urban areas, no matter what their state. In urban areas persons or agencies will eventually demand attention. An inattentive "slumlord" was publicly punished one evening in Des Moines newscasts because several poor residents there complained. The media then projected the plight of the residents into the homes of many central Iowans, and change quickly followed. In rural areas, however, who will lift up their voice for those who need help? Who will remember those who are being forgotten?

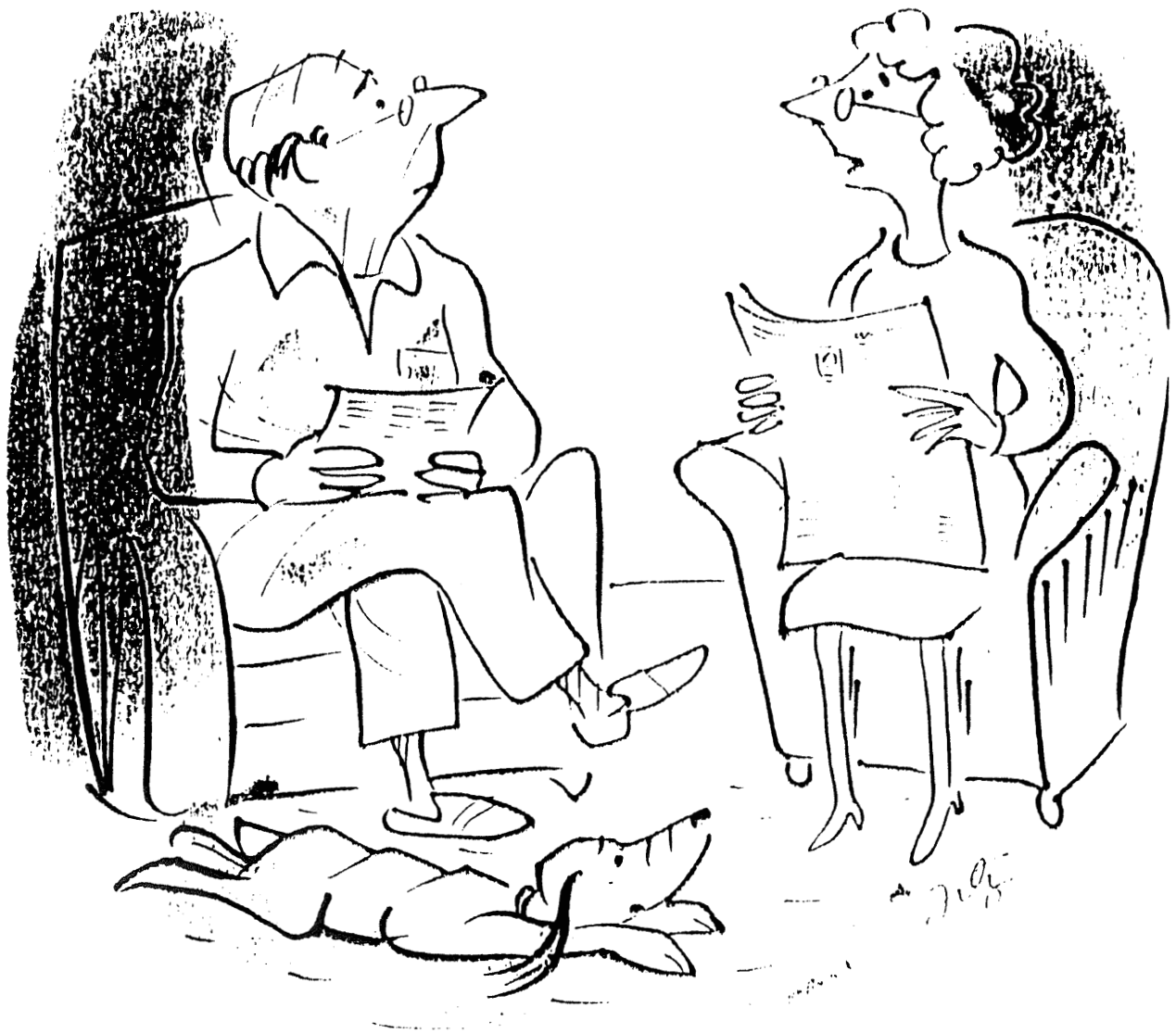
Here in central Iowa, where we pride ourselves in having one of the nation's highest ratings on the Basic Skills Test in our public schools, we have to be careful whom we ask to read in a Bible Study, so that we do not embarrass the ones who can not read. Research shows that "33% of all the adults over 25 living in rural West Virginia and eastern Kentucky are functionally illiterate, not being able to participate in our modern society because they can't read or write" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 56).

"In a society where, big-is-better, rural areas are at a distinct disadvantage. That applies to: (1) the voice an individual community has in affecting policies, and (2) the ability to attract external support and funding. Lack of numbers translates into 'low priority'--i.e., 'powerlessness'" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 60). Not only is this true for governmental policy, but the rural church and community generally are overlooked by denominational bodies, offices, seminaries, seminars, denominational, and extra denominational newsletters and magazines, and in church growth/renewal materials. This will be discussed in detail in chapter seven.

Dr. Val Farmer, a rural psychologist, states: "High-viability communities have more ties to state and national networks, and to governmental leadership to connect them with resources outside the community. Low-viability communities are isolated, with a small number of people" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 103).

Besides not being heard, rural people and communities go unnoticed. "You've heard of the Bermuda Triangle, well I live in the Rural Triangle," (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 164). You can get lost coming to rural America. Several of the people in our community receive their mail from a rural route in one town and are on a different town's phone exchange. A rural Friends church/meeting in Valton, Wisconsin sits in a lovely valley that looks like a post card picture but defies the dimensions of time and space in the "Rural Triangle." There are several old dial phones connected to different exchanges in the parsonage to be able to call different members. When calling to get instructions to visit there, often people say with a chuckle, "You can't get here from there!" It certainly is worth the effort, however, to see this beautiful place in the southwestern hill country of Wisconsin and to get to know the warm and friendly people of faith that live there. Sadly, intriguing places like Valton are easily passed over and forgotten by governmental and organizational agencies and by all of us.

Another problem we can see on our tour is the constant "brain drain that continues for economic reasons--resulting in increasing parochialism" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 175). One issue of the Des Moines Register had a cartoon on the front page showing a rural road with a large "ONE WAY" sign pointing to the distant sky line of the city (Duffy, 1995, p. 1A). "'What will happen when we're gone,' is the conversation that repeats itself countless times in a rural congregation" (Ruffcorn, 1994, p. 44).



I've been reading about old eastern money and about new western money and Texas oil money . . . how come we settled here in Iowa?

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

Another problem that happens as more people leave is that eventually the community contact centers and the churches close. "When a village abandons its most precious and beautiful treasure from the past, its future is impoverished beyond measure. The closure of a church is like the extinction of a species. A long, slow evolution is suddenly obliterated when the sword of closure hangs over a village church" (Van De Weyer, 1991, p. 137). When a church is threatened with closure then the faith of several generations that took form and who gave life to that form and who took back life from that form is threatened with destruction. One member of Bangor Liberty Friends asks an intriguing question: "What would happen, not only to our local culture, but to our culture as a national whole, if the rural church disappears?" (Patten, 95).

Because of the problems in rural America, not only is it hard to get the people to stay, but it is hard to get the pastors to stay. One denominational leader from the Midwest, who wished to remain anonymous, reported to Christianity Today, in November, 95: "Fully half of the pastors in my rural district have expressed a desire to leave" (Cryderman, 1995, p. 15). The Episcopal Church reports "a sharp reduction in the number of rural clergy and the sale of many rural rectories and churches" (Francis & Lank Shear, 1992, p. 97).

We have not seen all of the heartland problems in this section of the tour but I would like to direct your attention to some of the common misconceptions that walk hand in hand with the problems we have seen.

TAKING A LOOK AT SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT DWELLING IN THE HEARTLAND

The trends we have been observing are often accompanied by some common misconceptions about dwelling in the heartland.

MISCONCEPTION NO. 1: Metropolitan problems and need are more severe than rural problems and need.

"Do you know in Rural America today Blacks are 11% poorer than in our inner cities? Do you know Native Americans living on reservations in rural areas are even poorer than Blacks in Rural America? As terrible as this is for Blacks and Native Americans, do you know 75% of all the poor in Rural America have white faces" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 56, 57).

CHILD POVERTY RATES - 1990

<u>AGE/RACE</u>	<u>RURAL</u>	<u>METROPOLITAN</u>
Age 0-6	26.7%	22.0%
White	18.4%	15.0%
Black	52.5%	43.2%
Latino	40.7 %	38.2%

The table above by Agria & Jung in their book, Ministering In Rural Communities, paints a portrait that does not fit our outdated stereotypes of Rural America, or the depth and breadth of problems confronting rural children and families. "There is a tendency to believe that our nation's poor or unhealthy or undereducated are overwhelmingly urban and minority. This is an incorrect stereotype" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 218).

Neither the above authors, nor I advocate overlooking the problems in urban areas. In the cities, we must continue to share our love and faith and work to pass governmental programs that really work for the betterment of the people who live there. To overlook the plight of the majority of our population in rural areas, however, and pass them over in funding and programming just because their names are Clemons or Gifford, and not Chicago or Los Angeles, is pejoratively based on a misconception.

As we proceed with our tour, look with me please at the big court house over there in Hardin County and you can see just one example of how rural areas get overlooked by governmental agencies. Being fluent in Spanish I have been called on by both Hardin and Marshall Counties, sometimes in the middle of the night, to do translation and consultation in the police station and in the courtroom for a growing Hispanic population. I have volunteered this time as a ministry. There is no funded program for this service here in our rural area. However, one Quaker lawyer has requested funding for this service on several occasions. This is a program taken for granted in places like Des Moines and Seattle which provide legal translation and consultation for Hispanics, Orientals, or whomever may need it.

Sue Raftery a rural sociologist says, "Those who live in rural America are the last to complain about their lives, for they see their lives as more than the money or material things. The average rural family, however, meets the federally defined levels of poverty and are the working poor of our country" (Raftery, 1994, p. 2).

As long as the misconception continues that rural areas and needs are not as important as other areas then governmental agencies and organizations will continue to overlook the heartland. Unless voices are raised to change this misconception, little will change in the heartland.

MISCONCEPTION NO. 2: Rural life, is relaxed, with no hurry or worry; country folk are laid back and easy goin.'

Because of the economic crisis in rural America people who stay in the rural scene can only be captured on fast film. They have to scamper quickly from early 'til late to survive.

"Many tend to single out money as the scarcest commodity for most rural communities, in fact the scarcest commodity for rural communities today is time" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 130). Of the families in our community, I do not know of any where the wife and older children are not working, one way or another, to bring in extra income. Likewise, most of the agri-business men and women have to work at some other employment or business they operate to generate enough income to survive. Most of them speak with a wry smile of being a "hobby farmer." In other words they farm for a hobby as they drive back and forth to a daily job or operate a separate business on the side. "Farm operators in the U.S. have earned more than 60% of their income from off-farm sources during the past several years" (Facts and Notions, 1989, p. 1).

Dr. Val Farmer, rural psychologist states:

How do you face the farm bookkeeping or chores in the dark and under bad weather conditions when you've already put in a long and stressful day? Someone should write a book entitled, 'The Third Shift,' to describe the complex lives of farm men and women who have added full-time jobs to their farming and family responsibilities (Val Farmer, 1996, p. 21).

While taking jobs or starting businesses many rural people are also taking special training, or going back to school to retool for the demanding times in which they live. Juggling family life, church life, farming and a job many are, too, juggling degree programs or technical instruction.



**"One bad thing about farming is that a
person can't call in sick!"**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

Rural people spend a lot of time on rural roads. Where I live the county seat and the closest competitive shopping is 17 miles away. Children are in consolidated schools, requiring drives up to 20 miles or more one way for programs.

Mothers used to sing merrily as wee ones were schooled off to bed, "Early to bed and early to rise..." Certainly, rural people still get up before dawn to do chores, and they still work long days as farmers have always done. Now, however, lights burn far into the next morning in the shops, offices, and businesses of busy rural people. Though, they still try to take time to talk and visit with neighbors, there is no slowness in their walk, and less maple syrup drawl in their talk. They are juggling agendas and seconds count. As they scamper to survive, over their heads constantly hangs the tension of weighty unanswered questions: "Will we make it another year, or will we lose it all? Will we lose what several generations have worked so hard to establish? Yes, it is possible. The bank could call tomorrow and that would be it. After a sale it could all be gone. Like others, we too would be forced to move on!"

MISCONCEPTION NO. 3: One of the misconceptions of non-rural people is that the farmer is just a: "country bumpkin," "a hick," "a hayseed," "a country boy," "a redneck," or "one brick shy a load." This conception of rural and small town people has been around a long time, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). "Rural residents know what it means to live with diminished self-esteem. Pejorative stereotyping by self-proclaimed sophisticates and urbanites was evident at the time of Christ and remains so today" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 175).

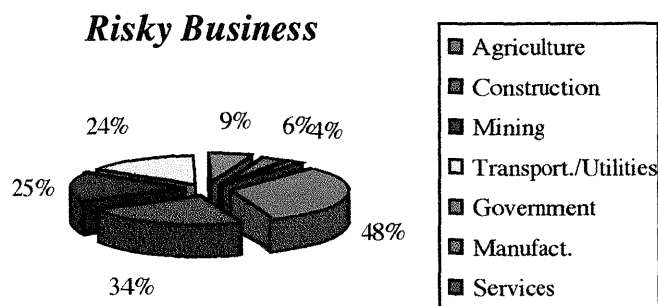
Agri-business persons have to be constantly updating their information on markets, seed, livestock, climate, chemicals, governmental policy, etc. Most of them have computers in their homes and on their machinery. They have to be making long-range projections based on informed and constant study. The news,

agri-business analysis, experience, talking with others as well as their gut feeling are used to make decisions every day which could make or break them. The drought in Brazil, the relations with Japan, legislation about ethanol, a governmental official's sneeze, could all affect what an agri-business person must decide right now and for just what conditions they determine to project.

MISCONCEPTION NO. 4: Life in the country is quiet, calm and serene.

It certainly is a beautiful pine fringed park scene here where I am privileged to live. Here in the unincorporated rural community of Bangor, Iowa, the church and parsonage doors are left unlocked. Deer, pheasant and wild turkey saunter lazily through the yard, often pausing to nibble or peck at something they find in the lawn.

Working in agri-business, however, is anything but safe! A November 1989 issue of Newsweek shows the death rate from accidents on the job:



The study shows that **Agri-business is the number one killer** (Albritten, 1988).

Since 1986, when I began to serve here at Bangor Liberty Friends with my wife Barb, we have had two children from our faith family die in farm/rural-related accidents. One was caught on a P.T.O. shaft (a drive shaft from a tractor to a corn crib elevator), and one was caught under a lawn and garden tractor that went into a ditch.

This last year a young man from our community who was in his twenties died of electrocution as he moved an auger that hit a power line. He left a young wife, pregnant with their first child, devastated and a community in sorrow. The year before that a husband and father died emptying a corn bin. There is a family in our community whose husband and father was paralyzed by a large round bale that rolled off the front lift of the tractor over him. He is a quadriplegic. Go to any gathering of people in the heartland and there you will see men without arms, or with only a few fingers, or walking with permanent limps because of farm related injuries. Go to any rural cemetery, and there you will see the graves of our little ones, and of those who died trying to make a living for their family.

MISCONCEPTION NO. 5 : Most of those attending rural churches are farmers.

As stated previously, even the farmers today are not just farmers. "Farm residents now number about 5.2 million and are a small minority even in the rural population" (Facts and Notions, 1989, p. 1). For example in Bangor Liberty Friends Church there are: school teachers; tax preparers; lawyers; city, county and national government employees; nurses; speech therapists; salespersons; carpenters; truck drivers; factory workers; office managers; accountants; bank personnel; insurance agents; crane operators; craft persons; cooks; janitors; secretaries; medical technicians; exporters of farm equipment; hair stylists; counselors; and others.

MISCONCEPTION NO. 6 : Rural areas and small towns are a minority. Public and organizational decisions and programs should reflect and favor the majority.

"The fact is, that from growing food and fiber to selling it in the retail store, agriculture provides jobs for 20.1 million people or one out of every six jobs!

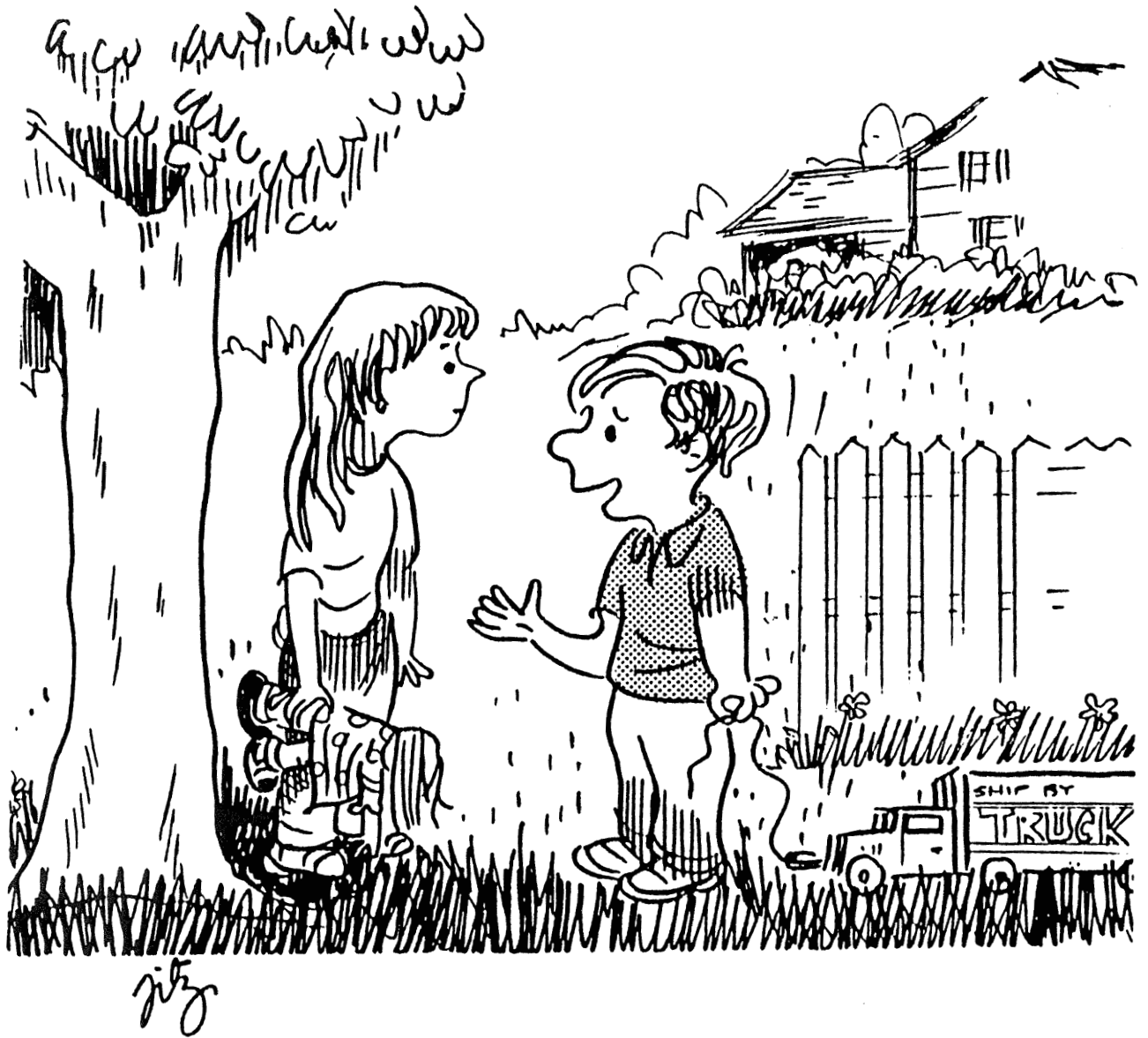
That means agriculture is the nation's largest employer, employing 17% of the work force!" ("Facts and Notions, 1989, p. 1). This myth-conception prompted one of the editorials entitled: Stop Spending On Roads That Go No Where!, in the Sept. 12, 1992 issue of the Des Moines Register. The author felt with all the needed changes for the roads and freeways in Des Moines the state should, "Cut spending for rural roads that go no where and put that money into the betterment of the city's streets and expressways." Certainly that sentiment was just expressed on the opinion page of the paper but it shows as example that there are many people with this prejudice. These roads in the Heartland do go someplace. They come to my home and church, they take food to the market, and our children to school.

The same can be said about denominations and organizations that respond to rural scarcity by cutting off the last few vias of connection for a rural community. In so doing they euthanize, close the casket and bury rural businesses, organizations and churches.

MISCONCEPTION NO. 7: Financial difficulty and failure on the farm are due to poor management. This misconception is double pronged. Either it is stated that the farmer over leveraged him/herself or that he/she borrowed too much; or it is stated that he/she is failing to stay up to date and are not making farming a business and so is failing

It needs to be stated that the bankers and financiers have often encouraged farmers to borrow more when land values were high. Many of those who did as they were advised were overfinanced when land values fell and lost their farms.

For those that blame failing farmers for not being more progressive it needs to be stated that farmers would love to upgrade and become more business like.



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**"Let's play farm . . . you be the lawyer and I'll be the banker."**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)



(Fitzgerald, 1988)

As a rural pastor I have had several farming friends and neighbors sit here in my office and share their hope to get newer machinery or a more efficient system of operation. They are very tired of rewelding and wiring together old, outdated machinery and working day and night in a labor intensive operation. To upgrade, however, takes an amazing amount of capital or collateral to secure the loans necessary for the improvements. As a society are we guilty of putting a double bind on people in agri-business?

Instead of directing the blame toward the person trying to make a go of it in agri-business maybe we should focus our scrutiny on those who really make the profit.

The grain trade processors, exporters, and retailers have a system of shared monopoly creating the most profitable sector of the U.S. economy. The average annual net income from 1980 to 1992 to farm families from farm operation in the U.S. was \$6,028 dollars. Something is drastically wrong with a food policy that puts the folks who grow the food on food stamps! (Farm Families Know the Issue: Prices, 1995, p. 2).

"Rural society is vulnerable to the whims of an urban-dominated marketplace" (Jobes & Gilchrist, 1992, p. 190). Thankfully as a society we are gradually learning not to blame the victim as we often have in the case of rape and spousal abuse. Economically let's be careful not to blame rural victims for the profiteering perpetrated upon them by the middlemen who manage the money in the markets.

Now that we have started our tour, taking an honest look at some of the trends, problems and misconceptions in the heartland, you will observe a bend coming up in the road where the scenery is beginning to change. Certainly we will still see where rural people are struggling but, as we look ahead, we will begin to see signs of new life in the heartland.



**"My gosh, Martha! They want as much for their 12-ounce  
T-bone as we got for the entire critter!"**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)



## SEEING SIGNS OF LIFE, THRIVING IN HEARTLAND

Despite the disheartening trends and problems we have seen there are rural communities and churches thriving in the heartland. Many of the thriving churches and communities are not too far from those that are dying or merely surviving. Here is a good example coming into view now:

This is the Brookdale church in a rural county whose population is declining. Its membership is steadily declining as well. The congregation is aging and contains few youth or young adults. The pastor at Brookdale is fresh out of seminary and spends half his time at Brookdale and the other half as a youth worker in a larger urban church located one half hour away. The pastor has had no rural ministry orientation or training in seminary or by his denomination. The pastor does not live in the Brookdale community but lives in the community where his other church work is. That's where his children are in school and where he naturally participates in community/school activities.

As we travel less than 10 miles along this same road, look, if you will, off to your left and you will see Our Savior Church. We are still in the same declining rural county as we were when we saw Brookdale. Yet, this church is almost brand new! Our Savior Church was founded seven years ago and has experienced a steady growth in membership and attendance. Regular Sunday morning attendance is now at 75 people, up about 10% from last year. The need for more classroom space for Sunday morning educational programs has recently forced council members to consider expansion. The pastor here at Our Savior Church is not originally from this area but it is obvious that he understands rural people and that he cares. He lives right here and works with the people in community and school functions.

As we travel across the heartland the contrasting scenes of the Brookdale Church and of Our Savior Church are not isolated ones (Rathge & Goreham, 1989, p. 59).

Why are many communities and churches in rural America dying? Why are others, who face the same odds, thriving? Let's think about those questions as we continue on.

Because of the problems we have seen previously, some rural churches have merged with other area churches. Some of the churches which have merged do well and grow. Some of the churches which have merged, have later separated. Some of the merged churches and parishes are dying. As we continue our tour together we will see examples of each of the above. What do you think makes the difference between those which successfully merge and grow and those which do not?

Some rural churches have moved into a town. Some of the churches that have moved into a town are doing well. Some of the churches that have moved into a town, however, are dying. The Pleasant Ridge Friends Church moved out of Glidden, Iowa, and away from well-traveled Highway 30. They moved **out to the country** several miles south of Glidden. Building a new church on the corner of a gravel road and a paved county road, they have grown. Despite the rural depopulating trends, they continue to be very much alive and growing. In 1995 the church had an average Sunday morning attendance of 187; took in 11 new members; had an average Sunday School attendance of 126 and a budget of \$101,000, with a pastor, youth director and secretary on staff. Why have some rural churches which have moved grown? Why have some rural churches which have moved not grown?

If mergers do not necessarily make a difference; if being in town or on an accessible road does not necessarily make a difference; then what does? The tour you

are a part of will look at and analyze these intriguing questions in the upcoming sites we will see and study together.

Personally, I have the privilege of living in a beautiful country scene. In this part of the heartland, where two Iowa county roads meet, sits Bangor Liberty Friends Church/Meeting. The brown brick church and adjoining parsonage where I live are 17 miles northwest of Marshalltown, and 15 miles south of Eldora. The hard-working people of this church and community are making a difference; their faith, love and service are impacting not only our local community, but reaching out around the world, mixed with plenty of heartland hope.

Last year Bangor Liberty Friends had an average Sunday morning attendance of 139 and an average Sunday School attendance of 109. They have been gradually increasing each year for the last 10 years. Several new programs have started in the last two years: The senior citizen's program and a regular youth program are examples. This last January, 1996, when the Sunday School attendance usually dips for a post holiday low, there was an all time high of 126! Here in the open country where other rural churches are struggling just a few miles away, what keeps Bangor Liberty Friends thriving and growing against the trends?

Though these intriguing questions will be treated later in the tour -- in their report on rural economy and depopulation, Jobes and Gilchrist discover the important underlying factor that differentiates thriving groups and communities from those that are not.

The importance of a sense of community well-being and of personal life style have been the primary reasons for rural people staying in rural areas despite low economic returns, high risk and personal hazard. This attraction is crucial for understanding. It is **not** the economic factor but the **participation in a social system offering social support** that is the primary reason that rural people choose a rural lifestyle (Jobes & Gilchrist, 1992, p. 190).

This study with other research demonstrates that it is not just the economic factor that forces rural depopulation. In fact, they make it clear that it is a supportive social system or the lack of one that is the key factor for people staying or moving from a rural area.

One of the problems that causes rural depopulation, then, is that many rural groups are losing the social skills that built and maintained rural communities for so long. In many places rural people, rural churches and rural communities are losing their touch, their personal touch. In many rural churches and communities people are out of touch with each other. In rural/small town groups and communities that are struggling people are out of touch with the school; they are out of touch with the church; they are out of touch with other community organizations and they sense these organizations as aloof and not wanting to be in touch with them.

The focus of this thesis is not directed so much on establishing economic viability to a rural community, but rather on something much more important. Establishing and maintaining social viability is what is crucial to maintaining a thriving rural/small town group, church and community. Unless we do that, our rural/small town churches and communities will continue to die. Where a viable, supportive social network can be established and maintained **down trends can be turned around!** The following chapters include studies and examples to demonstrate this point. As a viable social community is established and maintained then, even in a depressed economy, there can come new sparks of life, including economic life for that group, church and community.

The question, then, is how to establish a viable social community? How is a thriving rural/small town church and community established and maintained?

The rest of the chapters will picture from the Scripture, from research and from experience, what is at the core of a thriving church and community.

As we move from looking at the trends and defining some of the problems toward a new tomorrow the old chorus that I learned in a rural church as a boy comes to mind. Sing along with me if you know it:

My Lord knows the way through the wilderness,

All I have to do is follow.

My Lord knows the way through the wilderness,

All I have to do is follow.

Strength for today, is mine allway

And all that I need for tomorrow.

My Lord knows the way through the wilderness,

All I have to do is follow (Cox, 1951).

A big thank you to all of the faithful Sunday School and V.B.S. teachers for keeping the Word alive in the heartland!

## CHAPTER TWO

### NURTURING LIFE IN THE HEARTLAND

In this chapter the focus will be on creation. The creation of a climate that is conducive to the nurturing of life by the moving of the Word of God is the place of sense to begin.

#### CREATING A CLIMATE FOR GROWTH

What is the difference between a thriving rural church and community, and one where people are merely surviving?

Tex Sample, sociologist, professor, author and speaker, specializing in the area of rural and working class people, asserts a thriving rural church and community is where the living Word is *dwelling* in the heartland. Tex was the speaker in the 14th Annual Rural Ministries Conference held at the University of Dubuque in the spring of 1995. His publications and conferences continue to build and broaden on this theme: "'The Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us,' pitching a tent. A word that *dwells* is a word that joins the indigenous practices of the people" (Sample, 1995).

"The Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). When and where the "living and active Word of God" *dwells* in us (Heb. 10:20) – in *dwells* us, our church and community -- there is new and renewing "light and life" (John 1:4) for our time and for the forth-coming generations!

"In the beginning. . . the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the face of the earth; but the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the earth" (Gen. 1:1-2). Then God's Spirit brought both "light and life" into that which was empty and dark. God's Spirit does "not change" (Malachi 3:6), and is, "the same" (Ps. 102:27). God's Spirit can still bring "life and light" where there is darkness and emptiness to us as persons, to our rural congregations and to our communities.

Luke's Gospel says, "And Jesus came down to a level place to stand with the people" (Lk. 6:17). Bible students could quickly say, "But that verse refers to Jesus coming down off the mountain after a personal prayer time to be where the people were." Exactly, that is the point! Jesus spent time alone in prayer but then did not stay above the people or aloof from the people but continued to minister among the people on their level, living, eating and walking with them. This *indwelling* Word nurtures life where there has been "void" and creates a climate for growth.

Research published in The Rural Sociology Journal reports there is a definite difference between rural churches and communities where pastors and leaders do not participate with the people of a community interacting with them personally and those who, "1) maintain an office that is open to people, 2) spend personal time with the people in the area where they minister and, 3) where they positively associate with the people of a community in civic involvement" (Cantrell, Krile & Donohue, 1982, p. 87, 88). Churches and communities with the latter group of pastors and leaders tend to be thriving, while churches and communities with the former group of pastors and leaders tend to merely survive.

Jesus did spend those important moments alone in prayer. Pastors and community leaders today, too, need personal time to seek God away from the crowd. Research and experience both demonstrate, however, that thriving rural churches and communities have pastors and leaders who maximize their time being

with people in all the ways that they can. Not only is time with people crucial but leveling ourselves to their plane, interacting with them in their places of business and residence is just as crucial.

Another issue of Rural Sociology acknowledges when pastors and church leaders endeavor to join with people of a certain area there will always be "tensions between acceptance and resistance which will occur" (Ellis, 1984, p. 512). It is just as it was for Jesus when He came to dwell among the people of His day. He was accepted by some and rejected by many. Because of this "tension," it is far easier to live elsewhere and commute in to direct a service and to preach, shake hands and then leave. It is far easier to find all the good reasons to stay in the office preparing for services and church programming than it is to really connect with the people and to engage them on their level. It is far easier for church leaders and pastors to conduct committee and business meetings or to talk church business with a person than to have honest interpersonal dialogue. As pastors and as church and community leaders getting to really know the people around us and allowing them to honestly know us is one of the fearful tensions that keep us from really dwelling with the people. This crucial point will be reexamined and illustrated in later chapters.

Dr. Lance R. Barker, professor for church and economics at the United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities says, "to be effective rural churches must continually be a moral center that is being **present** to ourself, others and to the world" (Barker). Barker is speaking about the importance of having the *indwelling* Word, a "moral center," present within ourself and about being personally present with people. Barker is not just talking about being present as pastors in the pulpit or in business and committee meetings with church people. He is talking about being present personally and interpersonally with people individually as well as being



present in church groups and to the world. It is the personal presence connecting with individuals in the group that is being missed in churches which are not thriving.

Jesus interacting with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well in the Gospel of John 4:5-42, gives us a powerful example. Jesus engages a woman in conversation, asking for help, asking questions and following the flow of the conversation. He did not use the opportunity to argue (which was offered) about where the proper place to worship was. Instead, He speaks to her concerning something she needed physically and on a much deeper level personally. This is **interpersonal interchange at the intersection of possibility!** This is *dwelling* with the people. This is being present interpersonally with a person which opens the possibility for a miracle, a transformation. Being present, interpersonally with a person opens the possibility for the genesis of new life. The living active Spirit hovers over such opportunities, birthing new life. It is this spark of new life which generates and which transforms persons and communities.

John reports that this woman was different after the conversation with Jesus. The woman carried the spark of new life to others and it spread out in the area. The living Word brought thriving life to this woman and to her community.

Could it be the church of Ephesus addressed by our Lord through the Apostle John in Revelation 2:1-7 had lost this sense of *dwelling* with the Word and with those around them? As a church they had "persevered and endured." They were surviving despite great adversity but they had "lost their first love." Who is the love of the Church? What is the love of the Church? What had they lost? They are warned in the passage to change or the Lord "will remove their lamp stand out of its place."

There are many churches today in rural America that are surviving despite difficulty and depopulation but is their "first love" still fervent? Is the "Word *dwelling*, active and alive" there? Is their Love present in the now, felt and *dwelling* with those that live in the area?

### **LIFTING UP THE WORD AND REACHING OUT TO OTHERS IN LOVE**

The Word *dwelling* in the heartland creates a climate for growth. Lifting up the Word continues to nurture life in the heartland. One study done by The Center for Theology and Land in 12 midwestern rural communities emphasizes the one common denominator for churches that are thriving. "From the outset, people are really up front about their spirituality, and they are responding to a clear sense of call to live out their ministry as people helping people" (Jung, Peterson & Shelly, 1995 p. 18).

In churches that are thriving one senses their fervent, glowing love for the Lord. Their love for the Lord is natural, warm and real. As well, one senses their honest commitment and caring for their community, including the community outside their stained glass windows.

A thriving rural church, group or community is not one that is merely existing. A thriving group is one that has the spark of life and that is engendering that spark in the next generation.

In Schaller's 30 year study referred to in chapter one of this report, it was discovered among the churches which have continued to thrive in rural areas, they and their ministers have "a more conservative theological stance" (Schaller, 1988, p. 152). Those not taking a stand or taking a liberal position on social and spiritual

issues, tend to be in churches that are fading. Certainly examples could be cited contrary to these findings. However, research, including Schaller's study, generally show much more health among those groups that actively lift up the Lord and that base their faith and practice on the Word.

The main reason for this is mainline churches have taken up good causes in many cases but have allowed those causes to detract their focus from the Word. Schaller's study, with other research, shows that thriving rural churches have a focus on the Word as well as reaching out to others. Tony Compolo, Christian sociologist, professor, speaker and author asserts the same point but says, with hope, that the leaking Mainlines can be Fixed. He states mainline denominations which have been losing people and membership "can learn from the evangelicals and quickly return to the game as players in church and society. Mainline churches for too long have ground a social ax at the expense of pastoral care and personal conversion" (Compolo, 1995, p. 70, 71). In other words, the mainline denominations that have been struggling have neglected to be present, *dwelling* with the people as a part of their interpersonal pastoral procedure.

Scott Davis, one of the young men who has committed, along with his family, to the Bangor Liberty Friends fellowship and is actively involved in their Sunday school, had an observation concerning this issue. Scott was talking about his church involvement with a friend who likewise was becoming more active with his family in their church. Scott's friend stated, "Yes it's so important for our children to have a place to socially interact with others." Scott replied, "No, you're missing it! Without **faith** our children will see right through it!" (Davis, 1995). We each need a socially supportive group but at the center of that group and radiating out from that group we need a thriving faith that others observe and that we can share.

Churches which are thriving and growing in the heartland "emphasize the importance of the ministry of the Word--teaching and preaching--as important underpinnings of any efforts at building community. Jesus needs to be held up in front of us ALWAYS and in ALL WAYS" (Agria & Jung, 1994 p. 178).

Churches which preach a fundamental stance, hard and heavy, but are not reaching out in caring concern and love to those around them on a personal basis with people, are not generally thriving. Churches which are talking about loving others and including everybody but which are not doing so from a center based on the Word and are not really interpersonally reaching out to others are not generally doing well. Instead of arguing about whether spiritual or whether social issues should come first, we must uncompromisingly commit ourselves to both.

At Bangor Liberty Friends there is a strong and deep running commitment to the living, active, *indwelling* Word of God. At the same time there is a commitment, despite the "tension of acceptance and resistance" (Ellis, 1984), to reach out, interpersonally, in caring love and life to the community and to the world. The commitment we have made upward and outward as a church is reflected in the following comments taken from a 16-page survey done in 1994. In this survey new members express the difference church participation has made in their lives during the last five years:

Example expressions that reflect the church's **upward** commitment to the Word:

(each of the following statements is from a different respondent in the survey)

"I am new and finding my way back to God." "The church has brought me close to God." "We have gained spiritual knowledge." "We learn about Jesus, His teaching and His life." "Now Christ is the center of our decision making." "I am more reverent for the Lord."

"Our children have grown spiritually." "Our children talk about God and Jesus." "Our children learn about the Bible." "Our children have standards to live by." "Our children pray and talk to God."

"The teenagers in our home pray and have devotions now."  
"Our teen children have a love for God because of the church."

Example expressions that reflect the church's **outward** commitment to community:

(each of the following statements is from a different respondent in the survey)

"It helps us relate to the real world outside church." "Now I recognize that everyone is different and I respond more positively to different people, things and ideas." "We are becoming a community." "I have a real love for people." "I am more interested in other's needs." "Worship, Sunday school and Bible study have helped me come to terms with many things in my life so I won't pass negative things on to others or to my children." "I am more open-minded."

"Our children are more interested and open to other children." "Our children are more accepting of different people." "Our children are more polite to others."

"Our teenage children speak less bad language." "Our teen children mistreat each other less." "Our teen children are more open and loving to others."

Another part of the extensive survey indicates how Bangor Liberty Friends is perceived in the community, as stated by those who are **not** members but who live close by within a 10-mile radius. Again, these comments reflect the balance which comes from the upward commitment to the Word and the outward commitment to the community.

Example expressions that reflect the church's **upward** commitment to the Word:

(each of the following statements is from a different respondent in the survey)

"You believe in the Lord." "You are faithful to the Lord." "You are full of the Spirit." "You are known for your testimony."

Example expressions which reflect the church's **outward** commitment to the community:

(each of the following statements is from a different respondent in the survey)

"You are warm and friendly." "You are very caring." "You are loving and open." "You are involved in the community." "You are helpful to others in the community." "You truly are Friends." "You meet needs." "You are fair in community interactions." "You are known by your love for others" (Routon, 1994).

Creating a climate for growth and nurturing life in the heartland requires many things. Before any other program or investment will have an affect, however, there must be the hovering of the Spirit of God, the Word, alive, active and *indwelling*, bringing life and light where there was once darkness and void. The Apostle John goes on to say this "light, coming into the world, enlightens every person" (John 1:9). God does not leave out any person, people or place and verses 11 and 12 say all have the right to this life and light. John does say, however, that some would "receive" it and some would "not receive" it.

The choice is ours. We can go on just surviving and subsisting as a person or as a people, wherever we are, or there can be a climate for growth created and new life nurtured. We each choose our way as a person and we choose our way as groups of people. As we move through life we will have many other opportunities to renew our choice or to go back on the commitments we have made. Our choices will make all the difference.

In the custom of Friends, after sharing from the Word I would like to share some of my personal story and testimony. I do this so you can know me better and to illustrate the importance of a personal experience which is current with the *indwelling* Word.

As renewing commitments are made to the Word and as one reaches out interpersonally to others, lifting up the Word, it nurtures life in the heartland personally as well as for others.

My wife, Barb, and I have each made a commitment personally and as a couple to our Lord and to reach out to others in service for Him. As individuals and as a couple we have needed to renew that commitment as time goes by. Before we were married we sensed this calling and made that commitment. After college and serving as ministers with Friends for five years we tragically lost our first daughter at the age of five. She was backed over in the parsonage drive. This loss brought another choice as to whether we would continue in the ministry or do something else. In tears, we pledged our troth once again to the Lord, and committed ourselves, hearing God's call, to serve Friends as church planting missionaries in Mexico City. We served there for almost eight years when Barb was diagnosed with a serious and life threatening liver disease and we had to come home.

Once again we questioned whether we should continue in the ministry. After much prayer, we felt God's call and recommitted ourselves to serve Him at Bangor Liberty Friends. I will admit honestly, during stages of Barb's illness I wanted out of the ministry. I found other career prospects but I just could not feel free to say a final yes to any of them. I loved the sound of the weekends off and time to call my own but I have never been able to walk away from the ministry.

After more than 22 years of full-time service for Friends I can say that the ministry often is very painful and will always take more from a person than what one naturally has to offer. I can also attest to the wonder -- simply the wonder of experiencing life change inside of me and feeling touched by the ever-living love of

our Lord as I have made commitments to serve Him. Serving our Lord in the ministry I can, as well, attest to the wonder -- simply the wonder of seeing others turn to the Lord and see them grow and deepen.

For each of us, as our own personal life is nurtured in the heartland by the Lord, then there will be "light and life" to share with others beyond what we each naturally possess. With the ever moving, ever living "Word of God" *indwelling* us in the heartland, there will be renewing "light and life" for our time and for the forthcoming generations!

As the Word is *indwelling* a person, group or community there will be a natural response reaching out to others. On our next section of the tour we will see a thriving church and community responding in the heartland.

In the organizing of this project I have intentionally placed each chapter where it is. Chapter one gave us a scope of some of the problems as well as the potential for a thriving rural church and community. Here in chapter two the importance of having a personal experience with the living Word of God was emphasized. It is this experience which gives us the inner transformation and Spirit led motivation that is required to reach out in a genuine, loving response to others. It is only by and through this enlivening experience with the Word that we can bring true and time proven renewal to the church and community where we live.

The following chapters have to do with our conscious and intentional response toward the people around us as we have the living Word abiding in us.



## CHAPTER THREE

### RESPONDING FROM THE HEARTLAND

A thriving rural church and community have a natural loving response that is equal to insiders, outsiders and to all sides of the community. Real love naturally responds to others and conversely a caring response comes from love. The genuine response which is described in this chapter has its genesis from the enlivening of the Word that was described in the last chapter. In addition it will be observed in this chapter that a caring response is flexible, balancing tension, it puts "people before program," it responds in crisis and it finds forms and ways to express itself in heartland language.

### RESPONDING FROM CARING LOVE

A thriving rural church and community is one where people respond from the heart. To truly dwell in the heartland and nurture life there requires a caring heart-felt response toward people. It is this caring response that distinguishes churches and communities which are thriving from those which are merely surviving.

The caring response and the enlivening energy it requires spiritually, emotionally and physically is only possible when the living active word of God *dwells* in us as described in chapter two.

There are no programs which will make up for the lack of a caring response! In one of the interviews I did for this project with a neighbor and farmer I asked what it takes to keep a rural church thriving and keep it from dying. He was quick to respond: "The most important factor would be that the people in the church sincerely care about others in the community" (Willits, 95).

Paul Lasley, a professor and rural sociologist at Iowa State University, in an article entitled, State of the Church, Why are Some Rural Churches Thriving and Others Failing? states, "rural churches are a very important part of society." Lasley has been tracking rural church closings and says, "each one represents the close of an era for the local community." Lasley contends, "more than any other factor it is the attitude of established church members that seems to determine the number of new people which can be attracted to a church" (Lasley, 1993). If the people of a church really do care about others, that attitude will be perceivable to others. If the attitude of the people in a church is closed, or non-caring, then no matter what the established members may say with their words, their attitude will give them away and turn people away.

Jim Elsberry, a columnist uses rural picture language to describe the varying attitudes of the rural church. Some have a "gentle strength, providing a friendship and love that washes over you like a gentle summer breeze, attracting new folk and young folk, where there are concerned parents, men helping to fix breakfasts, and caring folk sitting by hospital beds night and day. . . imagine being part of a large extended family bound together with humor, faith and love." Then, Elsberry contrasts that with another attitude which can be felt in some rural churches: "they give you the feeling that you do not dare cross things they hold most sacred, and if you do you will experience the bite of their disapproval which can take your breath like a harsh January wind" (Elsberry).

In the book, A Guide for the Renewal of Rural Christianity, it is stated that "suburban congregations provide a perfect forum for pastors, leaders and people to perform in a puffed-up setting which is posh, attractive...and artificial. Pastors, leaders and people in rural churches are more reserved and shy than their performing cousins in the suburbs, as they have to live daily in front of each other."

The book goes on to describe, as Elsberry does, the contrast between the warm and the harsh climate found in different rural churches. "Growing rural churches have leaders and people who are genuinely caring. Their message and demonstrated love goes deeper, stays longer and is more honest in the natural setting where it is presented and lived out" (Van De Weyer, 1991, p. 42).

Van De Weyer then describes the rural church that just appears to be friendly:

They smile and say how much they want new people, but at the same time build invisible walls that shut new people out and they make little or no effort to draw in any newcomers. When any new comers do have enough courage to attend, they usually stop after a while and the ole regulars pacify themselves by saying, 'well, I knew they did not have much staying power anyway' (Van De Weyer, 1991, p. 146).

In fact, many of us in the rural church and community have constructed our own deceptive myth around our touted friendliness. It is often said, "Our doors are always open. If anybody wants to come here they sure can, we'd love to have new people. Anyone is always welcome here at our church and in our community!" We love to build that myth up. We know, if we are really honest with ourselves, it would seldom happen.

Someone is seldom going to, all of the sudden, vault out of bed early on Sunday morning and get all cleaned up to come into a setting where they feel unfamiliar. They are not likely, without some family or friendly connection and invitation to come and enter into every part of the service, change their life and start bringing all of their family to become members. This is a false myth, nevertheless it is a nice myth which we love to believe and which we practice restating regularly (Ruffcorn, 1994, p. 18).

In rural areas many of us choose to believe this myth because the repetition of it makes us feel nice, warm, caring, Christian, open and hospitable. At the same time we are relieved of our personal responsibility to really be reaching out to others in an

honest attempt to come to where they are and to draw them into our fellowship, helping to create a niche for them within our group.

All programs and activities initiated to bring life to a church or a community must generate out of a caring response that is real. Our genuine, caring response toward others will naturally create an atmosphere where people respond back to us and to others around them. A caring response and any program which comes out of it will thrive and grow.

A searching question that cuts through and tests our true motives was addressed to Peter by Jesus. After His resurrection in John 21:15-17, Jesus said to Peter, who had gone back to fishing, "Do you love Me more than these?" Jesus was asking Peter if he loved Him more than fishing, more than the fish net, more than this survival routine to which he had returned. Peter said, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Jesus replied, "Tend My sheep." Jesus asked Peter again, "Do you love Me?" Peter again replied, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." Jesus again told Peter, "Shepherd My sheep." Then Jesus asked Peter a third time, "Simon, do you love Me?" Peter was deeply moved because Jesus was asking this the third time. Peter had to think through the three times he had publicly denied Jesus after his assertion that he would follow Him to the death. With this painful third repetition of the question, instead of giving the quick, too easy answer, Peter said, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus then said to Peter, "Tend to My sheep."

Note Jesus did not ask Peter if he would like to tend to His sheep. Jesus did not start out by saying, "You know Peter, you have some qualities and gifts for ministry, what would you think about continuing to fish for men?" Jesus did not inform Peter he was going to be a great preacher testifying about the risen Lord whose Spirit

was still moving among men. He did not encourage Peter to continue in the ministry, saying, "You will be great!" If Jesus would have said, "Peter, I need you to tend My sheep and to be My minister and tell the Good News," Peter, as he always did, would have quickly answered, "Sure Lord, I'll do that!" Peter would have reentered the ministry and would have done great for a while and then he would have Petered out some where along the way. He probably would have quit later and gone back to his survival routine of fishing.

No, Jesus started where He needed to start, with the heart. Jesus did not first ask or tell Peter what to do, but wrestled through whether he did truly love Him. Peter did respond out of true love and later did give himself to others in a dynamic ministry, under the moving of the Spirit of God.

Despite the difficult times he faced later in life, Peter did not waver as in the past. Peter's ministry came out of genuine love. Tradition has it that he gave his life to tending his Lord's sheep and that he died, crucified upside down, in service to his Lord.

The most important thing we can do for a church, a group, or a community which we hope to affect positively, is to truly love the Lord from our heart and express that love. That love will naturally generate a genuine caring response to others. Working with people is one of the most challenging endeavors that any of us could ever do. We will have to struggle through conflicts which most certainly will arise. We will have to try and make our way through tough, sticky issues that will slog us down at every turn. We will have to face our own weaknesses at our worst, our own personal and interpersonal problems. All of these will bring us to crises points in our own lives. Without the deepest motivation of true love for our Lord, we will not be able to continue on. We will fall back to whatever our own survival routine may be.

So, before we talk about programs or ideas that bring hope to struggling people we must hear this very important question. Before we quickly respond we must hear it repeated. To the embarrassment of our past failures, we must hear it yet a third time, "do you love Me?"

### **CARING LOVE NATURALLY RESPONDS**

The sleek car slicing the curve and disappearing over the sharp hill captures our eye and pulls our attention into the next scene where the panorama opens up into the great, wide west with mesa tops and a large valley, the same car flying free along the ribbon of highway. Among all the fancy features the announcer describes in this popular commercial comes the catch word, "responsive." We like the feel of a car responding to our slightest touch as if reading our mind. It explodes out of a curve into a long straight, winds quickly up the switch backs and flares the flaps full without a fading waver from the brakes.

Whether it is cars or computers the catch word today is "responsive." People want a response. We each need a genuine response. Often we try to fill that need by purchasing what is pandered and pictured by super competitive marketing. Moving from the artificial scene to the genuine, there can not be love where there is not a response.

Jesus in the aforementioned and agonizing discussion with Peter in John 21 says then, if you love Me, "Tend My sheep." Love initiates and seeks a response.

We who would like to breathe new life into our communities cannot do so just by giving lip service to God and saying we love others. Love naturally responds and reaches out to others. We cannot say to our spouse we love them and then not respond to them, to their desires, their pain, their excitement and to the calendar dates we hold in common.

We cannot say we love the Lord and the people of our community and then not be in touch with the people personally or as a church. We cannot say we love the people and then not respond by being in their homes, places of business, restaurants, working in the field, or wherever they are. We cannot honestly say we want to help a group of people to thrive and then not respond to their phone calls, messages, ideas, questions, problems and suggestions.

Smaller rural churches may be friendly to those that normally attend there, but when someone new walks in, what happens? Does everyone rubberneck around to gawk at them? Are they greeted and visited with in a friendly, responsive way. I usually attend church traveling on vacation. Larger, growing churches have greeters that meet you with a smile, a handshake, pleasant conversation and an explanation about classes, restrooms, the entrance for worship, fellowship with juice, coffee and rolls, etc. In contrast to that, more than once, I have entered a small rural church and have not been greeted, have not been given an explanation about what was next or where to go, and have felt very much like an outsider as I was not included at all.

Beyond the labels of "small," "large," or "rural," people can instantly sense where there is a genuine caring response and where there is not. People will naturally be drawn to a caring response wherever it is.

A thriving church and community genuinely cares for people and naturally responds, reaching out to all levels of society around them. Some of the natural responses that come from genuine caring are mentioned in the next sections of this chapter: Responding with Flexibility and Balancing Tension, Putting People Before Program, Responding in Crisis and Touching People with the Language of the Heartland.

## RESPONDING WITH FLEXIBILITY AND BALANCING TENSION

"Love does not seek its own way" (I Cor. 13:5b), but love includes those around us and finds a new way to respond. Holding a healthy, balanced tension between being fixed and being flexible is a loving exercise for the heart. It is difficult with the constant societal change and moral challenge in our culture to know what truth to hang tightly to and what innovation we need for further growth. This is a tension we must deal with. I have many good Mennonite and Amish friends and this tension is just as difficult for them as it is for me. They may struggle over what kind of machine may be allowable for a certain chore and I struggle as a Quaker about the stewardship of spending so much money on the computer that has organized what you are now reading.

There are stewardship questions and there are moral questions today that will not go away no matter how much we may want to dispense them. Neither is this section, nor this thesis, focused for answering today's large questions. To be a thriving church and community, however, we must struggle with these questions and hold a healthy tension between being fixed and being flexible.

A study reported in the Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion asserts, "all investigators agree local church growth depends on adapting to local conditions" (McKinney, 1983, p. 52). This tension, if balanced well, will be healthy, pull both ways and be creative. The church which holds to a God who "changes not" (Mal. 3:6), which has doctrines and practices it holds sacred and dear, if it is to encounter culture at all, must open itself to people who are living and participating in a constantly changing world. The church certainly can have a positive influence on culture, causing it to conform more to the living Word through which is found true life and meaning here and beyond. Likewise, as a healthy tension exists, the church



will stretch while "residents act as an external force on the church, causing it to grow" (Rathge, 1989, p. 63).

Those rural churches that hold too tightly to a fixed position, from which they are not able to flex, are those churches that are merely surviving or dying. "The small churches that are dying, generally, are those that see little or no reason to adapt themselves to any newcomers who may enter their church or community, and who do not adapt themselves to reach out toward outsiders" (Van De Weyer, 1991, p. 146). In the same vane, the rural sociologist Paul Lasley says, "rural churches that are thriving are saying, 'we need to meet the people in our community and be willing to accept change'" (Lasley, 1993).

In a study of rural communities, published in The Exchange by Iowa State University, we find more proof as to the positive effect of flexibility.

While studying community change in the Great Plains and the West, among the characteristics of thriving communities are those that are able to respond to the changing macroeconomic circumstances and cause development to happen and who have a flexible, dispersed community leadership. These communities have a favorable attitude toward change and leadership that sees change as positive (Flora & Flora, 1990, p. 1, 4, 6).

Concerning the flexibility factor of Friends, outside sources say: "Quakerism, for example, is far less likely to become church-like, if given the opportunity, than many other denominations" (Swatos, 1981, p. 219). "Evangelical Friends are more accommodating and their services are more flexibly patterned than in most churches, not always following the same order" (Terry, 1990, p. 165).

As a minister with Evangelical Friends, I would like to accept the accolade and say that all is well, so that I could go on about other things and not be concerned about our future. The truth, however, is there are many Friends meetings and churches that are dying because of inflexibility.

It is true Friends are flexible in many areas, however, we can be surprisingly rigid in others. I was in an unprogrammed Friends meeting once in Detroit where it was clearly stated before we started they would have absolutely no verbal sharing. This was an unprogrammed meeting that was inflexibly regimented to silence. Many Friends have become very formal about being informal! There are many of us Friends who have three songs sandwiched by announcements, prayer and offering with just a touch of open communion and sharing. Following that, in the ritualized format, 20 minutes are given to the same speaker Sunday after Sunday.

There are other areas where church folk are inflexible and rigid. One of the traditional oral stories that is often recited here at Bangor Liberty Friends, especially as a new pastor is starting out, concerns the beloved antique clock that hangs, "tic-tocking," on the north wall of the sanctuary: "There once was a pastor who wanted a new clock on the back wall of the sanctuary, so he bought one and hung it there and took the old clock down." Parishioners then smile and nod as they say, "There was some discussion...the pastor later went to the mission field and the old clock stayed!" I was living and pastoring here six years before I was invited by the clock-keepers to wind our precious clock! Each Sunday it can be heard in our service marking time, tic, tock! Now, mind you, I have nothing against the ole clock; in fact I rather like it and, luckily for me, the ole clock and I have become friends. The rhythm and constancy of that clock help us through constantly changing times. The truth is, we country folk do have a l-i-t-t-l-e problem with flexibility and that is one of the reasons many rural and small groups are dying.

With the interesting tension between Sunday-best attire and being comfortable in the growing country church at Bangor Liberty, one day there appeared these words anonymously put on the bulletin board: "Should a young woman wear a baseball cap

inside the church? Shouldn't young men take their hat off inside the church? Should sports attire or shorts be allowed in the sanctuary?"

One elder and influential member wanted me as the pastor to establish a dress code and enforce it! Certainly there was a time when Quakers did fix their image and their acceptance based on dress as well as many other Quaker quirks. This period of history for Friends is also known as the "period of quietism." It is during this period when Friends began to fix themselves inflexibly to certain Quaker ways that Friends began, for the first time to wane.

Later hot revivals that spread across the Midwest challenged much of that Quaker formal order. Many Quakers remembered the Spirit filled and spontaneous preaching and freedom of the originating Friends. Flexing with the new trend brought by the revival allowed many Friends to find themselves, sense the moving of a living Spirit and begin to grow again. At this present point in history, however, many Friends in the heartland are much in danger of becoming tightly fixed into the form that was adopted during the revivalist era. Many Friends are stuck, unmoved and so are merely surviving.

Some of the other tensions which test the flexibility of rural churches that are thriving are for example: old hymns vs. new choruses projected on a screen; people talking and visiting vs. reverent, respectful silence; and we could list many more. In chapters four and five we will discuss more about managing these tensions. The balancing of the tension between that which is staid and that which needs to change is one of the challenging, exciting and fascinating tasks of church and community leaders. It is this tension that stretches a thriving group opening it and allowing room for growth.

Another tension that stretched the flexibility of the Friends at Bangor Liberty happened the first time they were asked if they would have communion with the elements and water baptism in the church. Friends do, certainly, believe in and practice the communion and baptism of the Spirit, but traditionally do not practice them with the physical elements. Several young families who were starting to come to church, but who had grown up in other traditions were asking these questions. They understood the Friends teaching and practice, and respected it, but still felt a need for these ordinances for themselves and for their children. This brought a very creative tension into one of the business meetings where it was being considered.

"Do we hold with our teaching or do we flex, considering the needs of these new people? Do we remain as a traditional Friends church or become more of a community church?" There was prayer and they endeavored to listen to each other in the meeting. Finally Wilbur Jessup, the eldest member at 94 years of age, spoke, saying something that surprised several. Wilbur had been born a Quaker and had participated in the church all his life. Wilbur is the local Quaker historian. When Wilbur spoke there was reverential respect for each word. Wilbur said, "We have always had our doors open here for anyone, and so they should always stay open. We ought to allow and help these new people to have what they feel they need...in a while they will come to the spiritual depth of our way and they will no longer need it." After Wilbur spoke it took more prayer and listening before a plan that would protect sufficiently what had always been taught and practiced as Friends and at the same time would accommodate the desires of those who were new in the faith family could be approved. What allowed growth, was that neither side won over the other but that a healthy and balanced tension between the two poles was allowed to be stretched, stretching each person and allowing more room for growth.

By the way, Wilbur has been right. For about three years there were communion and baptism services with the elements but as time has gone by, they have had several years without requests for either of the two services.

It is interesting to analyze this. There are still new people coming in to Bangor Liberty Friends but the need for services with the elements of physical baptism and communion has not been mentioned. Why? Beyond doctrine and practice, could it have been more of a subconscious test by those who were new to see if the established members would share the power of decision-making? Could it be the newer ones were subconsciously testing the established ones for their ability to flex and include them? What would have happened if Bangor Liberty would **not** have flexed, **not** shared the decision making and had **not** allowed special services for those desiring them? The answer to that question is speculative.

What did happen is that the new families have stayed with the church, have brought in others and they have all had more children. Now there's another tension! Many were saying 10 years ago they wanted more children and youth and wanted a youth group started again. After several years of hard work to accomplish this goal, they now have lots of children, a strong children's program and active youth groups. With the children they naturally have running feet chasing up and down the stairs, slamming doors and playing in the new elevator. Now some of the same people who said they wanted children and an active youth group struggle with the running, the slamming, the interruption of silence by crying babies and the NOISE!

There are some small, rural churches that talk about wanting newer and younger people involved, but when it comes right down to it, they really do not want to flex or to allow the change new people automatically bring. Many rural churches want new people, but want everything to continue on the same way they have always done it. "They want to have their cake and eat it too!" New people,

however, will automatically bring change. That is another reason folk in the rural church faithfully repeat the warm and Christian sounding words about wanting to grow and have new people, then do very little to make that happen. They want to sound open, when in fact they do not want to be flexible and deal with the change.

When we in the rural church repeat warm sounding but ritualized words about being friendly and open to new people, let us ask ourselves personally and in our meetings: "Are we really friendly? Are we ready to change? Are we willing to sit down, planning and praying together about how to reach new people? Are we willing to get up and get out of our seats to give a caring response to new people in our community, bringing them into our church and making a place for them?" Now, there is a new tension. When and if new people do come in to the small rural church and sit in the regular seats of some established members, just watch the frustrated tension!

We dislike politicians who speak much and do little to bring healthy change. Would we be guilty of the same thing in our rural church?

A truth we do not want to face in our rural churches is: If we want to grow, then we probably are. Conversely, no matter what we may say and how nice it may sound, if we do not want to change, and if we want to continue on the same old way until we die, then that, probably, is exactly what we are doing...dying.

Another truth we do not want to face in our rural churches, according to the penetrating discussion between Jesus and Peter, is that if we are not flexing in some significant way and reaching out in a caring response that brings others into the church, then, no matter what we say and how warm it sounds, we in fact do not love our Lord.

Balancing the tension flexibility brings is an intricate task. In our church we seldom, except for short moments, ever get the tension balanced exactly in the middle. One can sense, if they are in touch with the people, the tension pulling one way too much. One, then, adjusts the tension more in the opposite direction. Adjusting tension and balance is a constant task which requires listening to and being in touch with every member of a group.

There were two rural churches that were less than a mile from each other which become flexible, merged and started to really grow with a dynamic, full time pastoral couple. They changed their worship posture. They went from sitting with their noses stuck in dusty hymn books singing traditional songs played by an organ, to standing up, clapping hands and lifting their heads singing to a lively rhythmic keyboard. With the newer form they sang for almost an hour! Young people and new people started coming and the church was growing.

Some folk, however, were not excited about the new music or other changes that were happening. Sadly instead of realizing that it is possible to do both kinds of music and have some traditional form and some contemporary form, it all blew up into a power struggle where one side was "right" and one side was "wrong." Some strong traditionalists were able to get their hands back on the reins of the church and they jerked the whole team of horses and the nicely loaded wagon with lots of people and young folk to a sudden halt. The music and worship form was switched, inflexibly, back to the traditional way. The dynamic pastoral duo left. Many of the young and new people left and started a new church less than a mile away.

By not staying in touch with and adjusting the tension to a creative balance, neither church is any better off than they were before. There are still two small rural churches doing their own thing a little way from each other. Neither church can afford a full-time ministry. Interesting isn't it?

I certainly have to confess that neither have I as a pastor, nor have we in our church, always adjusted the tension to a good balance. We have lost some because at times I, as a pastor, was out of touch and at times we, as a church, have been out of touch with some who needed a tension adjustment that would have included them. For that I apologize personally and ask the Lord to help me. I am still trying to get this balance business down. Tension adjustment is difficult but fascinating work. I think I will spend my life trying to figure it out. If you see me out there as you pass by and have any observations about how I can do it better, I am open to them and would be glad to hear your ideas.

There was another pivotal point for the people of Bangor Liberty Friends when they were struggling to find the tension balance in a business meeting concerning new people entering the church. Many of these new families had been through divorce, had blended families, and some did not have a good reputation at all in the community. It was a delicate moment. One elder was crying in that meeting being so moved with the tension as to whether they should maintain the upstanding Quaker image in the community, or whether their church should be open to all.

The people prayed and had a time of silence. Out of the silence another elder spoke, sharing the parable of the wheat and the tares. "As I reflect on this concern, I remember these words from our Master as His servants wondered if they should pull the tares out of the wheat. 'No, lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest' (Mt. 13:29,30). The tares and the wheat were to be allowed to 'grow together' and the Master would do the sorting at the time of the harvest. Our task is to grow."

The church moved ahead after that refreshing breath from the living Word to flex, accept and adjust the tension. Flexing, finding balance, Bangor Liberty Friends



has made a place for those who have been added to their number as they reach out in a caring response to their community.

Later I was listening to a person who opposed the decisions of the Meeting. He thought we should all be of the same belief and family tradition, holding each to the same position. I listened to him, and then asked him about the fence that was right in front of us: "Could you build a good fence if all the posts held the same position? Isn't tension very important to build a fence? Don't we need each post holding its own position, to be able to create the tension necessary to have a good fence?"

Of course, we know nothing can exist without tension. A machine cannot operate without tension. A house cannot stand without tension. A church cannot be built without tension. We need tension creatively balanced to live and to grow. Too much tension causes an explosion and separation. Too little tension causes an implosion and suffocation.

In the handy manual, Ministering in Rural Communities, Agria and Jung assert:

We need to see people as potential—not problems. Pastors and congregations can find great support by breaking through the isolation that keeps them from experiencing new ideas and strategizing new solutions with others outside which will help them see new opportunities. Unfortunately, many of us have the notion that WE are central to making things happen, when it is the Holy Spirit at work in and through all of the body that makes ministry possible (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 203.)

A loving response toward others in our community will flex with and accept tension, endeavoring to find a creative balance.

## **"PEOPLE BEFORE PROGRAM"**

"People before program." I remember hearing this back in the seventies in a Friends ministers' conference at William Penn College.

None of us have enough time to get done all we need to get done, whether as busy lay persons or ministers. When I am trying to decide which important task needs my attention, this maxim many times helps me to make that decision. We in the ministry often hide away behind urgent preparations avoiding that which is really important -- being present with people.

Remember when Jesus and his disciples shattered some of the ripe wheat from the field into their hand to eat as they walked along one Sabbath? To the religious leaders, the program, the tradition must not be broken. What was Jesus' response? "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27).

It is putting "people before program" that has allowed Bangor Liberty Friends to flex and to address the heart-felt needs of those who have been new in church instead of holding rigidly to a traditional line. Putting "people before program" is a response from the heart which communicates genuine caring.

On a Sunday morning it is generally accepted the pastor, unless on vacation, should be in the church. I remember a Sunday morning when there was a fire in our neighborhood. Following the impulse of our heart at Bangor Liberty I, as pastor, went to the scene of the crisis, met with the family and shared in their sadness. They were astounded I was there at that hour. I assured them the people of the church wanted me to be with them to let them know we were praying with them. I also mentioned that after the fire marshal and the insurance investigators checked everything, we would be glad to help with the clean up, provide housing, etc.

The family became faithful and committed attenders. They help in the vital Sunday School and Vacation Bible School programs. I made it back to the church in

time for the last part of the service, people had been informed about the fire and the need to help. "People before program!"

There are always opportunities to put people first. Toward the end of our worship service one Sunday word was given that a young lady from our church who was in the delivery room had just given birth to a baby with gastrisis, (most of its abdominal organs were outside the body, the abdomen being open). Instead of continuing with the program that had been planned, the elders and whoever wanted to came to the front to lead in prayer. I went to the hospital to be with the family. There was a hurried trip to the University Hospitals in Iowa City, where I continued to stay with the family. The baby was saved and is completely normal today. We call her our miracle baby. "People before program!"

"People before program" is a caring response which demonstrates our love. I have an idea. Put this down, if your spouse is close, go over and sit by him or her and ask what's on their agenda. After they check your forehead to see if you have a fever who knows what might originate out of putting "people before program!" If your spouse is at work and by a phone, then put this down and call them and ask what kind of day it is for them; and "wouldn't it be nice to meet in town for supper together?" If you are not married, then put this down and find the nearest person, or pick up the phone and call someone and practice your listening skills for a little bit and see how much you can pick up that is new. Putting "people before program" is a caring response from the heart which allows for miracles to happen! So, put this down and experiment with putting "people before program!"

## RESPONDING IN CRISIS

Just as we cannot say we love the Lord or each other and then not follow through with a caring response, neither can we say we care and not follow through with a loving response in a time of crisis.

Dr. Val Farmer, a rural psychologist, writes regularly for agricultural publications. In one article about churches' and communities' response to crisis, he emphasizes that the:

Victims of tragedy need to know that people care. The response of friends and of the community means a lot, validating their pain and loss. The response should be immediate. Soothing and comfort given to victims during the first 48 hours after a tragedy improves their long-term coping ability (Farmer, 1995, p. 18).

There is nothing more moving than to see the response of a caring rural community when there is a crisis.

When Rebecca Hauser, a young mother and wife, was murdered in the Union community, the harvest machinery stopped right in the fields. Men left their machines. Those who were not helping the Hausers were home holding their own wives. The people here still have not gotten over the shock and the pain of that murder.

In the Quaker and Mennonite communities I have grown up in, I have often seen people leave their fields to work together in the fields of those who are suffering loss, injury, illness, etc. and do not return to their own fields until they have completely finished with their neighbors'. I have seen neighbors carry in food that would feed an army for a month of Sundays. I have seen farmers struggling to find transport for their own grain who instantly dumped what they had loaded to hurry and help salvage as much of a neighbor's grain they could from a burning bin.

Calls went out and in a matter of minutes there was a long line of wagons and trucks to carry as much salvaged grain to safety as possible.

As I was writing this, a man gave me a large bundle of meat to take over to a young lady that lives alone with her two preschool children. She had been abused and then abandoned by her husband. There are people from Bangor Liberty Friends who have risked their own personal safety to intervene and help abused women.

From this faith family, people have stood against popular teachers who were inappropriate and/or abusive to students. In one case, with the prayer and backing of our church leaders, I had to stand firm in the defense of a minor who was taken advantage of sexually by a teacher in our local school. For more than two years, testimony was given following the legal system. I had to stand against a highly paid lawyer from the teacher's union of the State of Iowa, until the teacher was finally dismissed and not able to teach in this state. While giving testimony for the minor I had my life threatened and my own children harassed over the phone, as different voices told them they were going to kill their dad.

The people of Bangor Liberty Friends have set up round-the-clock vigils for several days to be with a person who were dangerously suicidal. They have given transportation to people helping them get to the doctor. They have given up their nights to sit with those who are very ill and those who are dying. They have loaned their cars and machinery to those who have needed them.

The people here have provided housing for families who have had their homes destroyed by tornado and by fire, then have taken up generous offerings and gathered all sorts of clothing and household items to help those families get restarted. In some cases, these families were not going to stay in our community, but they were given the gifts in love anyway as they moved to another state.

There is one basic understanding in our growing Quaker community -- if there is a crisis we will respond. We do not just talk about it and pray about it, though those are very important but we also respond in some visible way toward those who are hurting.

Bangor Liberty Friends has organized specialized counseling and seminars for those who have lost their children in death. They have helped young struggling couples who were at risk in their marriage or abusive in their family to get professional help when they could not afford it.

For families struggling financially, they have helped pay fuel bills for winter heat, registration fees for children to get started in school and have their supplies, monies for necessary medications and travel when there has been a death.

It is important for a church to truly respond to people in the community in times of crisis if it wants to be a thriving church. It is not true that all rural churches and communities respond in caring ways in a time of crisis. Many rural churches may talk about responding to those in need but there are few churches today that have the tear tracks to prove that they really care!

"Do you love Me? Tend to My sheep." - Jesus

One of the big things that keeps us as people and as churches from responding in a time of crisis is that we simply do not know what to say. We do not have the answer so we stay away, until the funeral, then we fill the silence with familiar phrases like: "If I can do anything just call..." After putting the responsibility back on them to let us know if they are hurting, we keep them in our prayer and that is about it. We pastors do not often respond much better. We cloister ourself preparing for the difficult funeral which we tend to give fairly rote out of our little black book, do some greeting and visiting during the fellowship time and then disappear again.

People in crisis do not need our answers or some wise word that will help them understand. WHAT THEY NEED IS US and our CARING PRESENCE!

I learned this lesson myself in the ministry when crisis struck our family. I was sitting in my office studying when I heard screaming. Running to the source of the sound in the driveway beside the parsonage people were going crazy, holding their heads, rocking and screaming. It was our four and a half year old daughter they were contorting about. She had been backed over by a car, the tire going over her head.

There was the race to the hospital to no avail, she was gone. Stunned, we went from the hospital back to the house and the next day to the funeral home. There were two people, Rich and Sherry Young, good friends and neighbors, who came instantly to be with us and did not leave our side for several days. During that time, except in the funeral, our local church leaders did not come to visit with us. The people who were coming to prayer meeting regularly and praying each week with us did not come to visit us. They just could not find the words. Rich and Sherry said very little, we did not need them to say anything. We just needed them!

In a crisis people do not need you to come up with the right words, necessarily. They do not need to know they can call you if they need something. What they need is you, your touch, your caring presence. You do not have to say a word and it may be better if you do not. All you have to do is communicate that you care with your eyes, your touch and your presence.

As a full-time pastor/missionary for more than 22 years I have taken many classes and seminars to improve ministerial skills. However, Richard and Sherry Young taught me more about the ministry in three or four days than I have learned anywhere. The most important ministry is presence...a caring responsive presence.

It is vitally important to respond with caring in a crisis, "but the big rush of support in the beginning is only a good start. Ongoing support is crucial for a year to 2 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years after the tragedy" (Farmer, 1995, p. 18). This is where many of us in rural churches and communities let down. A few weeks after the initial crisis we tend to want everything to return to normal. Because of the crisis, however, things will not be the same again, ever -- especially for those directly involved. Dr. Russ Seger a counselor and professor in central Iowa, who specializes in the areas of grief, shared with me in an interview the importance of helping rural people cope with loss as we continue to demonstrate a caring response, long term.

Rural people have suffered systemic losses, physical and ideological losses, job loss, the loss of family farms, etc. They grieve in silence. Their communities and churches are the same as extended family. Change and loss in any part of the community affects the whole group. As some people isolate themselves when dealing with change, loss and death, so some rural communities and churches isolate themselves.

We can encourage them to process this with honest dialogue. Some will walk away from that process. If we can ask questions that help them recollect, going back five years to the incident, going back as far as possible to tell their story.

Create rituals that allow them to acknowledge that things are not the same any more. We need rituals to let go of the past (Seger, 1995).

At first this may seem a contradiction to what has been said earlier in this thesis. The need for change, flexibility and the Spirit's moving -- creating newness has been emphasized. The danger of becoming fossilized in vain repetition is a problem with the practice of rituals. Seger has a very important point, however, we need to hear. When we are going through the transitions and changes of life we need something that is staid and steadfast and does not change. We, as well, each need the new creation, transformation and healing of the Spirit's moving.



One way to get at this and to find balance between these two needs is to find new ways to do rituals. Creating rituals that address and respond in caring ways to the needs of people following times of crisis is a genuine caring response that helps over the long term. I am not suggesting here change just for change's sake. I'm talking about an honest, caring, Spirit-led response toward people who are hurting.

Through all of the tragedy we have suffered here at Bangor Liberty Friends in the last eight years, starting with our first child loss in a farming accident, we have prayed together in our various groups as to how and what we could do to address the pain and loss we have experienced. We have come up with several rituals that are innovative and that have been meaningful. Borrowing from our Catholic friends and Quakerising it we have, on the Sunday of Memorial weekend, had candles in front. People who have had a loss in their family are welcome to come and to light a candle for that person. This shows we remember the person and that they were a significant part of our life and the light of their testimony still shines. We have a tall white candle representing the Light of our Lord that is lit at the beginning of the service. During our time of open worship as people light the candle for the one they wish to remember, they share verbally. With the death and child loss we have had in our congregation these new expressions of worship, surrounded by familiar expressions of worship, have been very tender and significantly helpful to those who have been hurting.

In services where there have been sharing and tearful times we pass Kleenex boxes around, especially after a tragedy or death. Everyone is to take a Kleenex. If they are not tearful right now, that is fine, they put it in their Bible as a book marker and remember those in prayer who are. This practice has been named "Communion with the Kleenex box" by the congregation.

At Christmas and Easter people are invited to bring a poinsettia or a lilly to put up front in memory of someone they care about who has died. The name of the person who has died is then printed in memorial in the bulletin and newsletter.

For our children who have died and left us with empty arms and aching hearts we have put up white stars with their names hanging from the ceiling of the fellowship hall. All of the children in the congregation have a bright multi-colored star with their name on it hanging there around the white ones. This keeps the name and memory of those we have lost alive. Distant family members of children who have died have traveled here a long ways to take pictures of the stars that include the name of the child they miss so much hanging among all the other stars.

Where did these ideas come from? All these ideas have come from synergistic group activity. Synergistic group activity will be described in chapter five. From a deeper source, however, these ideas are motivated from the desire to respond to the hurt and the loss in people's life and to demonstrate that we care.

If we are to have a thriving church and community we will need to find caring ways that balance old forms and new expressions to respond to the loss that is a part of the lives of people in rural areas.

Rural people have to live with much loss. One pastor from the heartland states, "when I met with a bankrupted couple and their two sets of parents to try to sort out what needed to be done next, the scene was not unlike that in a funeral home. A farm death had occurred. There were many tears and not many answers" (Burkholder, 1987, p. 37).

"The loss of the farm and the loss of the physical connectedness to the land and the loss of an individual's and family's identity is, as well, a spiritual loss" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 41). As Dr. Seger said previously, some people experiencing the grief of loss will isolate themselves. "One farmer in crisis did not even realize that he had

not been in to town for over a year. His wife had been the 'go-fer'" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 42). He had shut himself up in his own world of work on the farm.

With the disinvestment in many rural communities, "the church may be the one, single remaining public institution still intact" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 44). Often times no one will respond in caring ways for these people experiencing loss if the rural church does not.

In the next chapter it will be demonstrated how to apply a caring responsive presence through networking in a rural church and community. However, this one concept of responding toward people who are hurting, if taken out the doors of our home, office and church and demonstrated in a caring way, will revolutionize and bring new life to our church and to our community.

## **"THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEARTLAND"**

Tex Sample, a leading spokesman for the heartland, talks in his materials and conferences about communicating the "language of the heart" (Sample, 1995).

To communicate with the "language of the heart" is an intentional exercise to express to others that we care. It is a response to others which demonstrates our genuine interest.

Tex talks about how rural people tell stories and have oral traditions. Picture language is a part of our everyday life. We say for example, "get busy, them boards aint gonna get up off the ground and nail themselves to the wall!"

I remember the stories my grandfather and his brother used to tell as we sat under the tall trees, white tufts of cottonwood floating in the wind, in the back yard: They talked about the spring and summer it rained whenever it was needed. Between rains the sun would shine warm. "Everything grew so much that year that

even the fence posts got taller! Yep," they assured me, "the fence posts grew and we had to add too more rows of wire on the bottom of the posts to keep the animals in!"

"One time," they continued, "the fog was so thick we had to go to the barn in pairs to do the chores. One of us had to hold the fog apart so the other'n could step through!" They would sit, smile and tell these stories and as a small boy, I would listen mystified, picturing the growing fence posts and the thick fog, but not wanting to miss the next story.

"Back in the dust bowl days it was so dry there were frogs around here seven years old that had never learned to swim! It never rained a'tall and when it finally did the first drops that hit on your daddy's head so surprised him that he fainted! Yep," they would both look at me seriously and nod. "We had to pour two buckets of dust on him to wake him up!"

These rural stories tell about a people, about their best of times and their worst of times. They are oral traditions through which the people share their history with the next generation. I never lived in the terrible days of the dust bowl in western Kansas but I have seen it through the eyes of my grandfather and his brother. They made the stories fun but I know in my heart, from the tacit communication that flowed from them with the stories that those times were terrible. I know something else, too. I know they made it, they survived, and I know how. They survived by faith in God, prayer, very hard work for "a little a nothin'" and by everyone helping each other. I know all that and more without ever reading a book or seeing any pictures because I have seen it and lived it through their stories.

I have heard a lot of excellent sermons but can not cite very much of their message. These stories, however, stay etched in the mind forever and teach truths that are everlasting to the next generation and are fun besides!

My grandfather and great uncle never ran out of these stories, they always had another one and they always had an audience because I loved to listen: "Our garden grew so good one year that we never got any full size melons. Yep," they would say, seeing the question on my face. "The melon vines grew so fast that they drug them poor little melons across the garden and wore the skin right off of 'em!"

As we relate to people in ministry, especially in a rural area, it is so important to listen to their stories. Their stories are their treasure, their history they are sharing with each other and whoever will listen. Treat them as sacred, for in a way they are. As one becomes a part of a community, learn to share in the story and learn to tell your own stories. This is a very important form of communication that is becoming a lost art in many places. Story telling is powerful and stays with people for a long time.

Tex then hooks the scriptural concept of the "Word becoming flesh, *dwelling* among us" (Jn. 1:14) with the need to find word pictures like the Proverbs and like Jesus used to present the Word to an oral culture. Retelling Word pictures from the Scripture demonstrates to those around us that we care. Referring to Jesus the Scripture says "and He was not speaking to them without parable" (Mk. 4:34).

Direct and assertive communication certainly is the trend today, especially in urban areas and in centers of higher education. In the heartland, however, people are more accustomed to, "tacit interchange, which is interchange with no direct explanation" (Sample, 1995). Tacit interchange is a very subtle way of sharing an idea or a thought without barging in or being intrusive. Those familiar with it can visit and look each other in the eye saying and knowing much more than what they are saying with words. At the end of the conversation and firm hand shake you might

have the feeling, if you are a third party observer, that you missed something somewhere. It may feel to you these two have just signed and sealed some treaty or document, but their words did not indicate anything unusual was happening.

After moving here 10 years ago, one of my neighbors told me, "when you come to visit just use the back door. We all know each other, and you can just come in the back door." Tacit interchange is coming in the back door instead of coming directly into the house of conversation. You knock and wait for a "come on in," and then casually go in the back door where you each connect. Coming in the back door you do not have to worry about what you may have on, whether dirty or not. Coming in the back door you do not have to go through the front room formality and its various stages. Tacit interchange is a very indirect way to be deeply direct and connect at the heart level.

Personally, I think this significant form of knowing communication is fascinating and needs to be practiced so it does not die out. It's a form which is actually quite refreshing in comparison to the very direct approach. Certainly there is a need for honesty, transparency and open sharing. I am not saying that being more direct is not healthy. Let us not do away, however, with the spirited interchange which happens on a deep level in tacit communication.

The reason this is so important is because of our mission to share a caring response with others. Acquiring the art of tacit interchange one can share that they care in a deep way, without being direct, even in a room crowded with people. You can say whatever the mouth finds to say, and yet tenderly, with loving care let the other person know that you know they are hurting, in personal pain, having a difficult time, etc. and you are praying for them.

This last Sunday, after my wife had been in the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, all week for tests, a six-foot-plus young man in our church came up to me at our chili dinner. He squared off with me and took my hand in his big one. I still do not remember exactly what he said but he hooked my eyes with his, put his other hand on my shoulder and we both just knew. He was letting me know he cared and he was praying. I had several tell me that directly, which I appreciated as well. I will have to admit three days later, however, I can still feel in my heart the impact of the tacit interchange. This fascinating form of expression is a powerful way to share a caring response with others and it can be done anywhere, even in a crowded activity-filled room.

Once learning this invigorating and enlightening form of communication, story telling and tacit interchange, a person who really cares about people and a community can use these skills to rewrite their history. This could be done in manipulation, but that is not what I am referring to. I'm talking about a very delicate, sacred subject here. As we are called by our Lord and sense His leading and honestly care about a people and community, then we can use these skills I am describing to interject hope. Especially where people and communities need healing, where they are depressed, where they have lost much, where they feel that they can not win, that "everything is stacked against them," these skills can be developed to interject hope into their history, into their present and into their future! This is rewriting a rural history or as Paul Potash describes in a very thought provoking study, it will direct a community toward a "New Rural History" (Potash, 1986, p. 160). We will talk more about this in chapter seven. "Chew on it a while."

Story telling and tacit interchange often do what was just modeled for you in the last paragraph. They will lead you up to something very intriguing and give you

a part and then leave you to think about it without giving you the whole. This is another significant part of the interchange. Do not ruin it by requiring or digging for the whole. This is a powerful form of communication which the Bible uses throughout. As we read the Scripture it fills us with wonder, answers some questions but causes us to ask yet deeper questions. This is the mystery of the Word and the wonder of tacit interchange.

In rural areas, especially, do not press people for all the details, take what is offered, think on it, pray about it, then get back with the person about it later and continue the dialogue deepening the subject. As a leader, pastor or even as a spouse, when you want something or think something is urgently important, be careful. If you "unload your whole wagon in one dump" you should not expect folk to get all excited about your cause and push your idea through to a working program. Until a person learns this skill they may often be discouraged after a committee meeting or discussion and feel that no one hears them or cares about their ideas. That is not the case. People do care, but it needs to be communicated in a way and in a form they understand.

Try making suggestions phrased as a conditional question with the word "would" or "could." For example, "what would you think about trying to learn more about tacit interchange?" Or, "could you meet me for lunch at the Farmer's Cafe in Union tomorrow?" Try mixing stories and word pictures in with your ideas. Share a piece of the idea, not the whole and wait. See if the person(s) get back with you about what you shared. If and when they do they will be more open about it. If they do not, you may not have started it right. Keep trying, it's fascinating and fun.

Heartland communication skills are more natural to some than to others but the good news is that you and I do not have to master this form to be able to share a caring response with rural people. If you simply try, people will know you are



trying and love you for it. The folk in Mexico where we served were so loving and patient with us as missionaries there. I made huge mistakes with the language and culture. They could sense I really did care, however, and that I was trying to communicate with them on their level so they responded by helping me a lot. On the other hand, in Mexico, I've seen demanding Americans in the banks and businesses. The foreigners who would not try and who would insist that someone speak their language and do it their way were often left alone and not helped at all.

Another form of tacit communication comes across in our dress and manner. Schaller in his bench mark 30-year study of rural churches emphasizes this point. Distinguishing the thriving rural churches from those which are just surviving, he paints a generalized picture of what the pastor looks like for each group:

Preacher Bob leads an active congregation which is building on the church. Although he has a degree and knows his theology, he dresses like most of the folk in the community. He wears comfortable clothes so he can help his neighbor get the cattle in and still dust them off and have Bible Study right after. He doesn't have a fancy car, just good ole transportation. Although people know where he stands on social and scriptural issues, Preacher Bob tries not to antagonize his parishioners or other townspeople by being narrow. Naw, he listens to everybody and doesn't confront too much, but he does ask questions that folk often think about for quite a bit. Though he doesn't come from around here exactly, he still can talk and walk, almost like the folk here. And he is willing to conduct funerals and weddings and visit with anybody, they don't have to be members for Preacher Bob to be their friend.

Now, on the other hand, there is Reverend Jones who is also a minister of a mainline church close by. Reverend Jones does not blend so well into the community's life-style. For one thing his denomination has recently assigned him to a three-point parish, and the way they have it patterned, he expects to move in a few years. The Reverend Jones's manner is more formal than Preacher Bob's and he devotes a lot of time to preparing everything for Sunday, in fact, he spends most of his day in the office, so that every little detail and every

little prayer is exact. He normally wears a coat and tie, which sets him apart and makes him look like one of the cult fellas that come through two by two once in a while. While friendly in church and in meetings, not many people can get real close to him (Schaller, 1988, p. 118).

Preacher Bob's tacit communication comes more from a caring response to the people. Reverend Jones may be a caring person, but people do not perceive his caring. It is this subtlety which makes such a dynamic difference in the lives of people in a church and in a community. From one, without any words and even at a distance, they feel accepted and cared for. From the other they are not sure. They hear nice words, but get no deeper feeling to confirm the words, so they are getting a mixed message.

As well as tacit interchange, Tex Sample emphasizes the importance of using music as a powerful way to communicate the language of love on a deep level:

There is a sound in every group that is holy. It will be distinct and different in each group. It is the sound that captures their imagination and projects hope. What is the sound that is holy in the group that you are with? Many formal traditions think that classical music is necessary for a religious experience. That is fine, but what is the soul music of the people who live where you are? If you do not play the soul music of a people they will not get a sense of hope. If you insist on classical music and hymns when the local expression of hope may be better projected in country and folk music then you are engaging in colonialism and in conquistador activity! (Sample, 1995).

In our church services at Bangor Liberty Friends we endeavor to have a mix of musical flavors, because we have a wide level of interest. We have different song leaders and instrumentalists rotating regularly. We also let the people give their requests to the rotating song leaders or to me to pass. People need to sing their music.

The power of music can cut through intense fear and probe into the depths of an Alzheimers patient's heart and bring out feelings and memories long forgotten. I have gone away from services on Sunday singing and humming a certain tune which has helped me all week.

My wife, Barb, uses music frequently in her specialized counseling role as a pastor and for Hospice. She has, beside the bed of a patient in pain, taken a hand and softly sang a hymn of hope. As she sings, I've seen the pain-filled brow relax, the tense muscles release and the fighting for breath become rhythmic and calm. Oh yes, music is a powerful way to demonstrate our caring at a deep level!

Personally I do not sing to patients or to troubled people because I do not want to increase their pain! In troubled situations, however, I have seen the spark deep in a person's eyes when I have gently used familiar lines from old hymns, such as:

Soft as the voice of an angel, Breathing a lesson unheard,  
Hope, with a gentle persuasion, Whispers her comforting word.  
Wait till the darkness is over, Wait till the tempest is done,  
Hope for the sunshine tomorrow, After the shower is gone,  
Whispering hope, Oh, how welcome thy voice,  
Making my heart in its sorrow rejoice.  
(Whispering Hope, words by J.C. Baker)

There are many ways to share an honest response from the heart which demonstrates that we really care. I have only mentioned a few to hopefully stimulate imagination and encourage us to find deeper ways to share the language of the heart.

If we really care then the heart will find a way to respond and express itself so the message is perceived and felt by the receiver. These are the kinds of deep caring messages when given, perceived and felt which stimulate the spirit, have resurrection power and bring life, alive and thriving to a church and community.

The next chapter talks about extending and disseminating a caring response in its many forms out to others in a rural area through a healthy social, faith network.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NETWORKING IN THE HEARTLAND

A thriving rural church and community is one that is networking in the heartland. There are many types of networking, those healthy and those that are not. For a thriving rural church and community healthy networks are needed. Rural churches and communities need networks with the living, active, Word *indwelling* them. This type of network will be a part of the life of a thriving group or community and bring life to a group or community.

The Language of the Heart and a caring response just described in the last section are the handiest tools available to connect a healthy network. The intentional response from a caring heart communicated to people on their level, in their language will connect a network that is sure, safe, stretching and strong.

A healthy network will be pictured as we proceed in this section. In short, a healthy network is an open, free, sharing, interlacing of people, their gifts and talents to connect them in an ever growing web of community. Any church or group can network in healthy ways if they choose. It is through healthy networking that a caring response can best be generated, targeted and received with the greatest amount of impact.

People will naturally be attracted to a healthy enriching network. Research shows that healthy networking can turn the down trends around for churches and communities.

For a thriving group, church or community there is the importance of: Investing in a healthy network; initiating, developing and maintaining a healthy network; accessing a caring, ministering network and having preaching, teaching and programming that flow from a healthy network.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INVESTING IN A HEALTHY HEARTLAND NETWORK

"The church can lead the way in providing a safety net for rural families. We need to replace the community of watchers and transform our parishes into communities of workers. All parishes have the potential to make such a transformation" (Raftery, 1994). In one interview for this study, "personal involvement" was mentioned as very important for a rural church to remain viable (Willits, 1995). A healthy network will require personal investment as it both gives support and requires accountability.

Rural areas already have networks. "Most of the people who make up the rural church community associate their kinship and neighborly relationship to each other as an attachment to family. These extensive ties through schooling, employment, church and other associations are an important aspect of their familial and local social identity" (Terry, 1990, p. 163). Some of these established networks are healthy and some of them are not. The rural church and community networker can use many of the existing networks praying for and helping to bring transformation to them as a growing faith network emerges.

Jim Elsberry, editor and part of the managing team for South West Newspapers, writes warmly of growing up in a rural, central Iowa Quaker community. He describes the network and as one reads about it the warmth can be sensed. This is an example of how a healthy church and community network can affect a person that experiences it in positive ways for all of their life:

Imagine being part of a huge, extended family bound together with humor, faith and love. I miss those people, but I'll never forget them. Once you've been a part of the Bangor Liberty Friends Church you never really leave. Mother Martin recently called me and asked if I would be willing to send something for the book of remembrances being published. Anything for the family! (Elsberry).

## Let's Join the Crowds

The country church stands staunchly, where,  
By the side of the country road,  
The crowds come far, to meet God there --  
And by prayer, lighten life's load!  
Steadfast and constant as is God's word,  
Stands the spire of the country church;  
Built from the vicinity all evil to ward --  
And the good from life to search!

Tucked away at the end of a country lane,  
Far from the city's boulevards;  
A monument to the residents spiritual plane --  
Proof that rural life moves forward!  
There to worship the community's families come,  
All dressed up in their Sunday best;  
They listen to the sermon, maybe visit some --  
And from their mind's troubles rest!

For neighborliness, too, it is an outlet,  
A place where goodwill is born;  
Where friends and strangers meet, minds all set --  
Willing from unneighborly deeds to adjourn!  
Lucky is the community that a church does possess,  
And lists it among its assets;  
Wise is the man whom his thoughts assess --  
And makes churches his hobby-pets!

Wise are the crowds that gather there,  
Learned are those whom faith keep;  
Valued are them whom those spires helped rear --  
And the community's gratitude reap!  
Their memory is revered when the bell tolls,  
The folks that helped build the church;  
'Tis Sunday! --the bell's music rolls --  
Let's join the crowds at the church!

Church for people in a rural setting "provides an important sense of community, for caring and belonging" (Holmes & Shelquist). "The church is the spiritual and social center of our lives, for us and for our children growing up. There we learn moral and spiritual values that guide us throughout our life" (Samuelson, 1996, p.22).

The importance of networking to have creativity and generate new life is stressed in The Journal of Leadership in Iowa:

Entrepreneurial communities are made up of people who actively seek out resources, who participate in planning groups, who investigate and apply for any governmental or personal aid available and who share their own resources, as well, in the community network to help others. They network and actively communicate with others inside and outside the community. This community is not dependent on a single 'broker' with contacts or charisma. These communities share leadership roles (Flora & Flora, 1990, p. 6).

A healthy rural network would include other area churches, the local libraries, schools and other community organizations, interlaced together as much as possible. "Rural churches need to form a larger community to learn from one another" (Tevis, 1995, p. 61).

For many rural and small town communities the church may well be one of the last organizations left. Without the church networking in healthy ways, there will be little networking at all and the community will cease to function.

This is what is so damaging when denominations respond to scarcity by closing down rural churches or by moving their memberships to a church in town. Research demonstrates that denominations in so doing actually "limit the community involvement that is left" (Cantrell, Krile & Donohue, 1982, p. 81). This kind of organizational behavior and decision making in response to scarcity can cause the ultimate demise of a rural community. In this way denominations, often

unknowingly, do great damage to a community that is already hurting when they break up the last few connections of a rural church's network. This problem will be discussed more in chapter seven.

The Bangor and the Liberty Friends Churches are reaping the rewards of one of the most beautiful miracles that can happen in a rural area as they have networked together forming a shared program. When two or more rural or small town churches come together in a marriage that works and produces new life, it is a beautiful miracle of love. Like any good marriage this requires the flexibility of both participants as they merge their life together. It also requires a minister who can be the catalyst at the right time to help to formalize an already budding relationship.

For Bangor Liberty Friends that minister was David Lewis who pastored here in the mid-seventies. As already illustrated earlier in this study, merged churches do not always do well together, nor is it best, necessarily for two churches to merge. But if each church and person gives of themselves and if done in the right Spirit, the bonding of two close rural churches can be a beautiful life-generating experience.

Like any marriage there have been struggles for both parties in this relationship. Each group has been very frustrated at times with the other. Both groups deserve to be given credit, however, because they have stayed the course and have worked it out, deepening their relationship together through their struggles. Now, because of their commitment to each other and their desire to see their love reborn, they are having children. The nursery is full.

There are many country and small town churches which could benefit from networking together and having a shared program. Together they could maintain a full time minister, which studies show as a key to a thriving church. Together they could do more. But, sad to say, most rural and small town churches will not flex



enough to share their history, their pride, their place and the idiosyncrasies of a neighboring group, (they themselves do not have idiosyncrasies, of course, but the other church they fear sharing with does)!

It is this unwillingness to change along with proud, stubborn individualism that keeps many churches and communities from networking in healthy ways. "Investing in and connecting a safety net, a network, research says is the most important thing that we can do to stay healthy and whole as persons and as a group. This is especially true for times of crisis that will come to all of us in life" (Anderson, 1994). Rural communities are certainly at-risk populations for crisis. Most rural churches and communities are in crisis. Many will die unless they begin to connect a healthy network.

As well as connecting people of faith, a healthy rural network helps for more rapid assimilation of ideas; of discovery; of information; of help both given and received; of a sense of protection and watchfulness; of recreation, fun and fellowship and to a ready response in and following a crisis. Healthy networks do everything from sitting beside the bed of a friend dying of cancer so the spouse can take a break; to worshipping together; to doing the chores and gathering the harvest of a family who has lost a child; to line dancing, (motion therapy for those of you who can not or are not supposed to use the word "dance"); to celebrating and roasting a hog together.

Ralph Brown, a rural sociologist and his colleagues studied 17 rural communities under 2,500 in population. In their study, they distinguished between "high-viability communities" and "low-viability communities." The leaders in both types of communities did not differ in age, education or occupation. They found these differences: The high-viability communities have more of a balance of men and women in leadership. The high-viability communities have more ties to local,

state and national networks to connect them with resources and information inside and outside of the community. The high-viability communities have more cooperation among leaders. Low-viability communities have people and groups who vie for power and who will not work together. High-viability communities resolve issues; low-viability ones do not. Leaders in high-viability communities exchange new information quickly, they are worker bees. Leaders in high-viability communities give their stamp of approval and support to anything, even if it is not their idea, as long as it is positive for the community. High-viability communities are well connected (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 103).

How and where does a church and community begin to connect a healthy network to become viable? That is the subject of the next section.

## **INITIATING, DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING A HEALTHY HEARTLAND NETWORK**

There are many places and ways to begin to connect a healthy rural and small town community network. The way a person or group can go about it best depends on the active leading of the *indwelling* Word and on the talents of the people in the group, church or community. As well, procedures for healthy networking will depend on the socioeconomic culture of the community. These vary dramatically from community to community. For example, as I travel six miles in rural, central Iowa from Bangor to Liscomb, I will be entering a completely distinct cultural area.

So, the initiating questions to build a thriving church or community network, are: "Where should we begin?" and "What needs to be done?" These kinds of questions need to be asked to the people as visits and interviews are made in an area where the network will be established. These questions need to be directed to people personally and individually in their homes and where they work. In a group they

will not be able to speak honestly because of their fear of what others may think or say to their responses.

Whether church planting in Mexico City or endeavoring to bring new life to a rural area, this initiating method is the same. The network, if healthy, will be the network formed of and by the people. Naturally the pastor can and needs to participate in that network. To come in, however, with our own agenda, seminary training, top down directives, ect., and to form a network on the basis of our agenda is colonialism and quite inappropriate. The network set up by a pastor or leader, that is not owned by the people, will be abandoned when that pastor or leader leaves or dies and will never operate on a bigger scale than what the pastor or leader is able to manipulate. Manipulative networking is a better term for those kinds of networks and they are not healthy.

The church, group or community network formed, whether in Mexico City, the inner city of Philadelphia, Navajo Land in Arizona or in rural Iowa, needs to be composed of and operated by the people. The church needs to be their church, the program needs to be their program. To find out what needs to be done and where to begin, the only viable way I know is to spend time with the people, listening and asking questions to find out.

Visitation and community contact, then, become indispensable to form a healthy network and a thriving rural church, group and community.

Whenever I initiate a new ministry or a new phase of ministry, visitation and contact in the community is where I begin. For me, visitation and community contact are always about showing I care about the person or family and that is number one. I do that by listening to them, asking questions about the things they bring up and sharing personally as the Spirit leads me. I endeavor to listen and engage them in leveling, reciprocal dialogue.

The Apostle Paul, when going back to visit the people in the beginning church groups said, "I want to visit them to see how they are" (Acts 15:36). That is what originated Paul's ministry to the churches. Clearly he was directed in Acts, by the Spirit, to go to them and to initiate ministry. But, we see he initiated viable ministry with the people as he visited and listened to see how they were.

Going to visit people and making contacts to see how they are is a healthy motive and is non-manipulative if it is done with true caring and tenderness. Of course there are times a pastor will visit and need to work on an agenda. However, when possible, I put that agenda aside. Many times even though I have had a concern, or matters I needed to talk to the person about, or matters we needed to talk "church" about, I work hard to refrain. Talking about agenda items says to them I have come to work on the agenda that is important to me.

Freeing myself from my agenda or the church agenda allows me to just visit, listen and to follow them. Often times, as stated, I have purposely *NOT* brought up church business but stayed with their conversation. I want them to know that I am spending time with them because I care about them and I want to hear them. Out of a conversation in true reciprocal dialogue, attuned to the moving of the Spirit, will inevitably come healing and growth for each participant. Out of conversations that are not manipulated by us or our agenda will come a sense of leading about what types of networks and programs the people may be needing.

Visitation and community contacts with these motives say, tacitly to everyone in the community, much louder than words could ever shout, "I CARE ABOUT YOU!" On the other hand a pastor or leader could preach great sermons and say he/she cares but if there is little visitation or community contact the people will not

believe them deep down. Tacitly, louder than words could shout, the pastor or leader doing little visitation and people contacting is saying, "YOU ARE NOT IMPORTANT AND I DO NOT CARE!"

Please let me re-emphasize. A pastor or leader could be visiting and connecting a lot with people but if he/she is always working on church business, trying to share ideas or program that he/she has come up with or his/her own personal stuff, then that is **NOT** what I am talking about here. I am talking about visiting, to listen and to demonstrate that we care and to see how people are. Out of those conversations will be sensed what the people need and are feeling. Networking, programming, preaching and teaching all need to be born from those kinds of non-manipulative conversations, visiting and contacting people in the community.

This visitation with people is not a time for us to speak at length or give speeches. If we are, then we are not listening and are manipulating. We already live in a "word saturated world" (Bauman, 1983, p. i). People will politely listen but not hear much that we have to say. They will smile and shake our hand and we will each go on our way no different. It is better, when speaking to rely on questions and silent space to get at where they are and then to follow them as Jesus did with the woman at the well. Nervousness will attempt to answer the problem too quickly, quote scripture and hurry on, filling the uncomfortable space with words, passing over it so we do not have to really deal with it. Questions and -- silence -- work miracles! How many times did Jesus use questions? For what reasons? What happened when He did use questions? What happens inside of you when you hear one of Jesus' questions? How do you feel when people speak to you? How do you feel when people visit with you, being interested in what you have to say and asking you questions?

"Language is the House of Being. In its home man dwells" penses the philosopher of phenomenology, Martin Heidegger (Heidegger, 1971, p. 52).

We can not build a healthy network, a church or a community unless we are building dialogue together. Our reciprocal dialogue with each other becomes our "House of Being" in which we can grow as persons and then as a group. Our group can only grow as far as our dialogue will allow. If there is little interpersonal interchange with people in the intersection of possibility, if there is little reciprocal dialogue, then there can be little growth.

Heidegger pictures for us a dialogue that goes deeper than the mundane and comes to the knowing of the Divine as each participant engages in the conversation. It is fascinating reading, from which I reproduce just a small part:

- I: Certainly -- the one thing that matters is whether the dialogue, be it written or spoken or neither, remains constantly coming.
- J: The course of such a dialogue would have to have a character all its own, with as much silence as talk.
- I: Above all, silence about silence...
- J: Because to talk and write about silence is what produces the most obnoxious chatter...
- I: Who could simply be silent of silence?
- J: That would be authentic saying...
- I: ...And would remain the constant prologue to the authentic dialogue of language.
- J: Are we not attempting the impossible?
- I: Indeed... (Heidegger, 1971, p. 52).

"I" and "J" continue on with their dialogue and Heidegger makes a very good point as the conversation develops. What both "I" and "J" are after and what they both need and want is to know the "Messenger's course" and the "unconcealment" of the Messenger's plan. "I" and "J" realize they can only attain that in mutual dialogue.

The philosopher is making an impressive point. He is saying it is not impossible to get at the Ineffable. He is saying it is possible to begin to describe the Indescribable.

Though God is beyond our description, (here is the mystery and the miracle), we can, through deepening dialogue together, begin to describe Him and what His course is for the world and for us! Heidegger is saying one of the ways to Truth, to God, to know God's course for the world and for us, in fact according to Heidegger, the only way, is through developing, deepening dialogue with another person. Another of Heidegger's strong points made in this conversation is the only way to "attempt the impossible" with any success is by beginning with and continuing with a developing, deepening dialogue.

The place to begin and the way to continue doing what is difficult, the turning of down-trends around in rural America, is with dialogue. The place to begin and the way to continue to build up a church or group or community wherever it is located, is through visitation and leveling, reciprocal, healing dialogue.

This kind of visitation with this kind of motive is **free** and **freeing**. I've heard many pastors and church leaders say how hard it is for them to do visitation. No wonder! We work so hard at it! We put so much agenda in that has to be worked out and problems that have to be resolved. The people's problems, our problems, the church's problems, wow, such a heavy load to carry with us as we go visiting. And to be truthful, our sub-conscious is screaming that we do not have a good solution for most of those problems. Wow! What a burden! No wonder visitation is work. No wonder visitation is hard to do. No wonder it is so hard to get up and turn off the TV or stop whatever we are doing and go out and visit!

No wonder, with us carrying all that heavy baggage, people do not really open up as they see and sense the weight of our agenda. No wonder they meet us politely

at the door, and invite us in for a quick chat that stays superficial. No wonder we walk through our ministry so exhausted, carrying all those burdens of unresolved issues. Who can talk very long or deep to a traveler with their hands full of baggage?

Personally I endeavor, (though sometimes forget), to leave the baggage in the appropriate place before I go visiting. I do not have anything to resolve, or issue to work out, when I go visiting. I am there to show I care, to listen and to see how they are. I like visitation and community contacts. Conversations are fun and they are deepening. During the conversation, with the people, we may cry and laugh. I endeavor to pray at the end, asking their permission and asking what they would like me to pray for. My wife Barb has a great point to make here, "Asking helps to remove a lot of doubt." Do you wonder if you should pray or what to pray for as you visit with people? Have you asked them?

After visiting with people I always feel deepened, more aware. I feel ministered to as I have ministered. That is what the Spirit does when people care enough to really hear each other. I always have a new appreciation for the people I have visited and for what ever it is they may be facing. I feel more united. Friends/Quakers will especially understand that I feel more in communion with them and with the Spirit in a deeper, newer way.

This kind of visitation is much more engaging, deepening and fun than TV or most any other thing I could imagine doing. Well, maybe there are a couple of other things I might enjoy more, like spending time with my family on a tropical beach or motorcycling through Wisconsin or in the mountains out west. Right after those things, however, would come visitation.

It is no wonder many of our churches and communities are dying. We are losing the rural art of visitation! It took people contacts to form and to hold our



communities together originally. Visitation is what it will take to bring them together today.

The person(s) visited will gain trust and openness and will begin to wonder if they could trust other things, deeper things they have not shared. The pastor or initiator of the visit will learn much more about the person(s). They will know much more about how to relate to them and how a healthy network would best serve and be served by them.

Visitation and community contacts are natural results of a caring response. Visitation and community contacts say to people we care. Visitation and community contacts say to people we want to hear them. "The capacity to listen--combined with a broad, ongoing visitation policy is among the most valuable skills a pastor or a group of people can cultivate, especially in a rural area. In rural churches the pastoral role is bound to be: 1) More relational and intimate and; 2) far more visible and exposed than in large churches" (Agree & Jung, 1994, p. 121).

From the outset church growth is linked to pastoral care shared by the pastor/priest and laity. It was the monks who won Europe for Christianity. The monks did not simply preach to people. They sought to make friends and to look after those who were sick and poor. When the converts would revert to old pagan magic, the monks would visit from one homestead to another. The love and care the monks displayed radiated from them and churches were established. They did not threaten people with hell fire, or preach long sermons. Instead, they visited from one place to the other, listening and talking to everyone they met and visiting the homes of the sick.

The church, more organized, has fallen into ritual and as a result is decaying. If the church is to be revived it will be revived the same way it was started, displaying loving care through people contacts and visitation, going to the people (Van De Weyer, 1991, p. 141).

It is important for a pastor and a church to make contacts wherever they can and it is important to have some program or membership list so certain people are not left out of the visitation plan. As well, "a calling and visitation program

should include those who are new to the community, who have visited the church to worship, who are inactive, the shut-ins and those who are prospective members and you want to draw into the church" (Exman, 1987, p. 114).

In visiting, listening to people, community contacts and expressing care for people it is important to sense responsiveness and non responsiveness (Exman, 1987, p. 106). As the Spirit is moving in people's lives some will be receptive and responsive while others are not. To begin to connect and to interconnect a healthy network of people it needs to be stated and shown that all are welcome to participate, however, some will not be responsive. That is OK. Do not make them feel bad or guilty. Do not feel rejected yourself and quit. Just continue on, watching for openness and receptivity as visits and contacts are made.

As we watch and sense for receptivity, just who are the receptive people in rural areas? The research shows that the most receptive, responsive people are those who want Christian nurture for their family or because of family issues. They have had children and now sense the mystery, the responsibility and the inadequacy of being a parent. They want to be involved with a network where they can participate, fellowshiping with others, helping and receiving help from others.

Another example of those who generally are receptive are those who have older children and older grandchildren who are making lifestyle choices which grieve them. These parents and grandparents hurt deeply inside and often tell no one. They need a network where they can hold on to the future as they hold on to one another praying for each other. These are just two of many examples of people who are most receptive and responsive and who, for family reasons, need nurture and a healthy network.

As we think together about visitation and community contacts it would be good to consider not just who the receptive people are but why and how it is receptive people do respond and come into rural and small town churches. The research shows new receptive people come to a rural church:

Because of evangelistic services, 1%; because of special needs, 2%; they come on their own to church shop or see if it suits them, 3%; because of church programs, 3%; because of the Sunday School, 5%; because the pastor visited them and, or invited them, 7%; because a friend or relative invited them, initiating contact and followed through to help them get there, to feel at home and to help them find a place in the church, 79% (Exman, 1987, p. 114).

It is obvious, from the research, if rural churches and communities are going to do healthy networking that the lay people, along with the pastor, must work together in visitation and community contacts that bring people into the network. As demonstrated above, new people very rarely will come into a rural/small town church and stay unless they are invited and brought and helped to niche in by a friend or family member.

That brings up another very important point about networking. As a person and group begin to do visitation making caring contacts in a community, there will naturally come from those contacts that are receptive and responsive, further contact possibilities for the future. In the conversations one will learn of another neighbor having trouble or of a brother having surgery, etc., that can be followed up on.

Cold calling and evangelism will produce few results. Following up on the network of receptive contacts that naturally comes out of a visitation program, will result in the best response for enlarging the network.

As we have discussed who are receptive to become part of a rural networking church and community, likewise, it is important to note from research who are

non-responsive and why. The list of those non-responsive to networking is of note because these are the ones who get left out. The following findings are published in a study entitled, Church Growth for Small Town and Country Churches by Gary Exman. Because rural people are the most underserved people in our country, then these non-responsive people to rural church and community networking **are the most overlooked group of people in America**. The reasons for their non-responsiveness to networking are:

(Type 1) They are non responsive because of difficulty. Because of bad luck and life's hardship they have lost much. They are hurt and angry at God and reject Him because they feel He has rejected them!! As a representative of the church expect to be rejected by them. Expect anger.

As listeners who care, let us hear their hurt. It is good to listen and really hear without interruption or trying to argue their anger and hurt away. Their anger and hurt, if they share it, is a gift. These hurt people do not share easily with anyone. If they open to you and share their hurt, then take it as a gift, accept it, hear it. Give them permission to be angry. Remember Job was angry at God, wished he had not been born and could die. Job was honestly praying and dialoguing with God and with others. He might have worked through it in less than 40 chapters if his so called "friends" would have listened and asked questions instead of debating him. Job got angry and Jesus got angry. God is big enough to hear and to handle anger. Are we big enough to hear it and to hear, with it, the hurt underneath?

Anger is almost always a covering for hurt. Can we hear the hurt and engage with questions that will let them know we really are listening and we really do care?

(Type 2) The Self Sufficient Type. Their motto is 'I can do it alone.' These have usually not had much real personal disaster in their life and manage things fairly well and are sure they can continue to, 'manage things just fine, thank you!' They do not feel that they need a close relationship to God or to the church.

I would like to interject a caution to Exman's words here. Most of these "type two non-responsive people," have encountered personal disaster in their life, but as I observe and sense, because they and their family have always maintained a resiliently independent persona they find it very difficult to change their image. It would cause them to lose face and so, though they want to deep inside, do not become a part of a network, or reach out for help, or allow others to help them.

These people become very, very lonely on the inside while maintaining a very resilient affect on the surface. My experience has been they usually will not allow themselves to talk directly about their loneliness or about the difficulty that has happened to them. With this type, especially, a knowing person can use tacit interchange to land messages that communicate their care and concern. Over time tacit interchange often will soften their defenses and some will open up to a caring, supporting network. This type takes much prayer, time and tacit interchange, focused by several caring persons. Through this process some will become a part of a network.

If they do show openness this type can give to the network quite easily but find it very difficult to receive. Do not push this point. Accepting and understanding will go a lot further than direct suggestion for the need of change. There are many of these "type two" persons as Exman describes in the heartland.

(Type 3) These have been hurt by former ministers, past church decisions and past actions by church people. These are the most non-responsive.

The reason this group is the most non-responsive is they cast the blame for all their hurt on one person in the church; or the pastor, present or past of the church; or on some incident related to the church, and then build a large multistory edifice on the base of their unresolved bitterness. Like every conflict, since there is some wrong and some right on both sides, if they were to allow resolution, they would have to

accept the fact they, too, have made some mistakes. They usually will not do this, insisting the church or person or pastor in the church is entirely at fault.

Even if the pastor or persons from the church do go and apologize completely and ask for forgiveness these persons seldom will really forgive. If they did it would pull out the principal column holding up their elaborately erected edifice they have painstakingly built over the years and it would all come tumbling down. I have seldom seen where they will allow that.

The best way to not lose these people entirely is to endeavor to ask for forgiveness as the Bible instructs us to when we realize there is something between us and our brother. If that does not work it is important to send two people from the church, again as the Scripture instructs, to listen to them and to try to work it out. If that does not work it is best to back off, pray and to wait.

The Spirit will provide openings for reconciliation. As we watch for them, the *indwelling* Word will bring new opportunities out of the darkness and the void. Others in the network who were not a part of the offense can be brought in to make contacts with the person and his/her family. Usually direct mention of the incident, by this time, will not work, but just visiting and dialoguing as has been stated before is what is most helpful here. Visiting without any agenda and listening and tacitly communicating concern and caring is the place to begin again with this group.

There have been times I have said and done, (though well intentioned), things that have offended others and separated them from me and from the church. This grieves me deeply. If a person is involved in the ministry and with people, he/she will, inevitably, offend someone, some family or group. The place to start for all of us is to ask the Lord to forgive us and then to start in on the process described here.

As we continue to learn and endeavor to reach some of these who are most non-responsive, the ideas of others, prayer and dialogue about certain non-responsive people are important. It is through our faith network which we engender that we will reclaim some of these.

As I pray for those whom I have and whom others from the church have offended in the past and as I hope and watch for opportunities opened by the Spirit, there is a line from a larger verse which helps compose and direct our response to their non-responsiveness:

**He drew a circle that shut me out, heretic, rebel, a thing to flout!  
But Love and I had a wit to win, we drew a circle that included him!  
(author unknown)**

(Type 4) The social achiever who is not interested in the church. This type helps in the community and they are great people who work very hard in community organizations, for the school, etc. but have little interest in the church.

This is one of the many reasons why community contacts and participation are so important for the church and pastor. Frankly many rural churches are disengaged, and not networking with the other organizations in the community. That is not healthy. That, no matter how much the church may sing of "love", tacitly communicates clearly to the community the church does not really care about them.

When these "type 4" people see the church and pastor are genuinely committed to the community and share their enthusiasm and dedication to community enterprise and network, they will take interest, and some of them will participate, then, in the faith network.

At Bangor Liberty Friends Church there are new people coming, some young and some old, because of members' active participation in Kiwanis, the school board, as school volunteers, in the South Hardin County Betterment Association, and the list could go on.

(Type 5) This is a group made up of those who are single, divorced and, or, who are single parents or parents of blended families. These people are often socially ostracized from rural churches" (Exman, 1987, p. 110).

The church and community effort to network needs to be careful not to overlook these and to include them. It is particularly painful to be rejected by a church or not accepted by a church because of pre-marital pregnancy or because of divorce or remarriage. As well as including them in the faith "net" for support these people have much to offer.

For initiating a network we have observed those who are responsive and non-responsive. Now, the focus of this section will turn more toward developing and maintaining a healthy network.

Schaller's report reveals that thriving rural churches spend more time visiting and calling on members and people in the community, which to them is more important, than preaching, sermon preparation and conducting worship services (Schaller, 1988, p. 120, 121, 147).

In their rural ministry handbook Agria and Jung observe in the thriving rural church the pastor is: "1) More relational and intimate rather than being an independent manager-leader; 2) far more visible and exposed." Their research continues to assert that thriving rural ministers were more concerned with visitation and the physical, mental and spiritual health of their people than they were with the priestly functions of preparing for and performing services of worship (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 121, 126).

When I first entered the ministry I had the privilege to work as an assistant pastor with Francis Ross who has been a very wise and successful Friends pastor. Francis taught me many practical things, like how to keep records for the IRS and fill out all the forms in ways to save money as a self-employed person.



The most important thing I learned from Francis was the importance of visitation. He took me visiting and it was very enjoyable. He taught me to personally set a goal of initiating and averaging two visits a day. "Average two visits a day and the church will do well." He has been right. All these years I have held to that goal. Visitation is fun, invigorating and deepening!

Francis was a successful pastor and churches grew where he served. Francis, however, by his own admission, was no flaming pulpit. He preached the Word faithfully and his sermons were edifying, especially over the long term with a powerful collateral affect. Francis did not spend a great deal of time preparing messages, however. He spent the mornings consistently in the office and the afternoons consistently in visitation. There were many evenings, too, when he was out visiting the people of the church. All the churches where Francis went grew and the people loved him. Just as the research bears out by Schaller and by Agria and Jung above, visitation and community contact are the most important ministries for building up the church. When Francis stood to speak, people listened. His tacit interchange with them through visitation told them he was committed and he cared for them. Through his regular and consistent people-contacts, he had a finger on the pulse beat of the church.

Does this research and experience then mean the sermon and the time spent on it are unimportant? No, for those of us who are pastors, we do need to give time to prepare messages to the degree that it does not keep us from interchanging personally with people. It just means that we, as pastors, have often made the sermon and worship preparation more important to the deference of being with people. We as pastors need to ask ourselves if we use the study and sermon preparation as ways to hide from people. It is not uncommon for pastors to play

"hide and seek" with the people, "Now you see him/her, now you don't." I wonder if it must seem to people that we are often hiding while they call "come out, come out wherever you are!"

It is through interpersonal interchange that the *dwelling* Word will become active. That can certainly happen in the sermon time, but in a rural church, especially, will not happen unless the people get equal time where they live and work. In chapter seven there will be discussion about how important it is to have an office and how to make pastoral offices into connecting places so they do not become hiding places.

Visitation needs to be tabulated and reported to the body of elders of a church and to the general business meeting. Confidentiality must be preserved, so I report the numbers. I keep track of them in a date book. I break them down so that I have a monthly record of calls to: "Adult Members", "Young Adult Members", "Youth", "Children", "Hospital", "Counseling", and "Prospective Visitation." Each month the totals and percentages are reported and each year those are given in an annual report.

Regular reporting is important. It is very easy for a pastor and for church leaders to talk about the important aspect of visitation and then go home with good intentions and do little else. We in the church so often ritualize words to make us feel better, then do little about what we have expressed.

Every church needs to make clear to the pastor that visitation is required and set the goal with him or her. There needs to be accountability if the goal is not met. There needs to be flexibility to make attainable goals and there needs to be compensation for goals attained.

As has been asserted, the visitation and community-contacting program needs to come from the church and pastor working together. But it will not happen if the

pastor does not model this regularly. Even though the people will, according to the studies, have a much higher percentage of success, the studies also show that the people will seldom do this if it is not modeled by the pastor.

There are other reasons why the pastor often is not interchanging sufficiently with the people interpersonally in a church and community. For one example, I was called as a consultant to a rural church to help them with several problems, one of which was the need for the pastor to do more visitation. In listening to the pastor and to the people on that particular issue, it became obvious what the problem was.

The church was requiring him to teach a Sunday School class, preach and lead a Sunday evening and mid-week service. In addition he was supposed to take care of the parsonage yard, mowing in the summer and snow removal in the winter and do maintenance on the parsonage. In addition he was to take care of the church yard in the summer and walks in the winter, do some maintenance and cleaning of the church and keep the church furnace going. The furnace was a wood burner, and you can already guess who was responsible to cut the wood for the furnace! The poor fella was doing some visitation but they wanted more and they could not figure out why he was not doing it.

Some were shocked when one of the suggestions that came out of our brainstorming session together was that they trade him maintenance time for visitation time. Some in the group suggested they "take care of the maintenance items themselves and they give him more time for visitation." Others in the group were not so sure about that, "All the former pastors had done all that and we don't know why he shouldn't!"

Some times it is the church and their requirements that sabotage the initiation of a visitation program and sometimes it is the pastor who is the roadblock to initiating a caring response in the community.

A friend of mine in the ministry just did not like to visit and make community contacts with people. I would invite him to the little town cafe so we could visit and so he could become more familiar with the people. "No, I don't like to go there, too much smoke," he would say. After a time, though the church asked for more visitation and community contacts and he just did not do it. The church finally asked him to resign.

To put bread on the table for his family he took a position in an insurance firm. Then he had to make people contacts. It was either make the contacts or not have any income. It was interesting. After the career change he was in the little restaurant meeting people and out initiating visitation daily to develop his sales network for insurance. The sad thing is that he has a tremendous presence with people, gifts for ministry and prefers the ministry to insurance sales. He could have been developing a network full time for the Lord instead of developing a sales network for an insurance company.

In his defense I might add this was his first church. His ministerial training did not prepare him to know how to build a network. He was taught, basically, to know how to study the Bible, how to prepare worship services and how to preach and to teach. He did those things well and faithfully but failed in the ministry because no one prepared him to network. The insurance company has given him the networking training and he is very capable of doing it, he just had to be shown how to do it and how necessary it is.

We will discuss more about this concern for ministerial training schools in chapter seven.

Visitation needs to be done in the community, in the homes and work places where the people are. In rural areas a pastor can even visit in tractor and combine cabs. There is a misconception the rural male will not talk much. If he does not talk much it is because one is not engaging him on his level or on his turf. Do you have work clothes? Do you have chore boots? Rural people, especially males want to talk and will talk as a pastor or leader comes to where they are and works with them.

For heartland males, it is important to be doing something active. Do not expect them to sit down in front of you, in the office, or even in their own home and dump all their "stuff." Heartland males, generally, share as they work. Could you go to where they are working and visit with them there? As they operate machinery, they are captive and become somewhat bored of the routine they have down so often and usually enjoy a caring presence to dialogue with.

Most modern machinery is quite safe for the pastor or friend to ride in with the operator. It is always wise to ask if it would be OK first. If it is not safe, they will usually stop for a moment and talk with you in the field. Remember, however, especially during spring planting and fall harvest they are SUPER busy, and as they stand politely talking to you, they will be thinking about what they should be getting done.

As well, it is good for the pastor to visit in other places of business or factories, wherever the people are. When I ask about this, usually the person is delighted I am interested and arranges a tour or coffee break or lunch with me. In visitation a pastor and leader experiences life where and how the people live and when that is done regularly they will love you for it.

In addition to regular visitation, the research demonstrates the need for active community contact by the pastor and people to initiate, maintain and develop a

Visitation With Rural Men is Best Done Where They Live and Work  
Or on the Move



**Golly . . . Mary Lou, I appreciate your support.  
But, what I said was, "It's time we do a little spraying."**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

healthy network. A significant majority of the thriving rural churches in Schaller's study reported the minister's and church people's participation in community affairs, in secular, service, patriotic and special-interest groups. Schaller builds on this theme saying that ministers and people of thriving rural churches not only initiate networking but maintain the network through the practice of community contact. They not only participate in groups like the ones mentioned above but as well are found in the local restaurants drinking coffee and eating lunch with friends, neighbors and people who come in. For the pastor, Schaller says, "ministers who reduce social distance between themselves and local people are more effective and their stays more pleasant for all involved" (Schaller, 1988, p. 115, 169).

One rural pastor could not attract anyone to a regular, ongoing Bible study so he started to go regularly to the local diner. He noticed as he naturally visited and held to that time the group began to grow. He observed he could accomplish more in those weekly sessions in a public place than he was trying to accomplish in a formal Bible study in the church (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 115).

If we can organize Bible studies and prayer groups in the church that are growing and help connect people to a healthy, faith network, great. Bolstad the active rural voice cautions, however, as in the above example, against forcing Bible studies when people are not participating to build a healthy network. Quoting John Schramm the speaker for the 1991 National Conference on Rural Ministry, he asserts that some insist on having Bible studies and having the "Bible Americanly, when what we want to see is a community and a country biblically." He continues, calling us to do as Luther and other great revivalists did, which was to have "living word encounters" with the people where they were (Bolstad, 1992, p. 25).

Agria and Jung in their rural ministry handbook, review and summarize the importance of visitation and community contact to initiate, maintain and develop a healthy network in a church and community:

Visiting can develop the relationships which become the glue that holds rural homogeneous congregations together and molds them into alive, Christ-centered, evangelical congregations with a strong active sense of mission. Visiting is conversation that develops a relationship based on information given and received.

In rural areas we know about everyone, but, no matter what we think, we do not know them without really visiting with them.

The purpose of the visit is **not** to ask the person(s) to do or to give anything. Everyone is different and unique. Fascinate yourself with getting to know them and their interests in the visit.

In this kind of visiting exchange both the visitor(s) and those visited will be changed. There will be a new and a deepened relationship replacing what had existed before; with better understanding by all and with fewer assumptions.

Shared interests and gifts will pull a congregation together and hold it together. Visitation should be used regularly, intentionally and prayerfully (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 155).

For rural pastors this concept of visitation and community contact is like one of the game rules. Play by this rule and you get to play the game. Go against this rule and you will be asked to leave the game. Play it close to the line all the time and you may get some runs, but you'll get a lot of foul balls too. Foul balls count as a strike, except for the third strike, and after several you will easily strike out and you will be asked to sit down.

In Schaller's 30-year study of rural churches, those pastors who remained in the ministry and who were, "satisfied," with the ministry, reported common responses to the question: "What are the main satisfactions of a rural ministry?" Their various responses could be summed up in the phrase: "Working closely with people on a personal basis" (Schaller, 1988, p. 94).



While visitation and community contact continue at the top of the list for initiating and maintaining healthy networks and for having a thriving rural church and community, there are other factors that contribute as well.

It is important to have a phone in the church and in the parsonage and for the pastor and leaders of the church to establish some sense of office hours. It is important to have consistent office hours as much as possible so people will be able to contact the pastor personally. This reduces, to some degree, the frustration of people who get tired of playing "hide and seek" with the pastor.

While answering machines can not give a personal touch, it is important to have one in the office and parsonage. People need to make contact with the pastor and often can not. This is very frustrating for them. Some simply will not leave a message on a machine and that is fine. A growing number will, however, and there needs to be a timely response. The key word for networking is, "response."

It is amusing to me as I call other churches and parsonages working on our own rural network, that I often get an answering machine that assures me "your call is important to us and we will return your call as soon as possible!" "Right!" Once in a while the other pastor will return the call promptly, often times they will not. To build a healthy rural network, our responses need to be as prompt as possible.

Along with the phone many of us are getting "on line" with e-mail and fax capability. I can not believe how many computer generated communications we have been getting in the church office since getting on line. Through the computer terminal we are initiating and maintaining networks that are much more direct with our mission field, our state and national offices, other churches and people in our church and community who are "on line". For counseling, especially with youth, I have found some people will talk much more transparently through a computer than they will personally.

There are those who are connecting with me through the computer concerning suicide, marital strife and other issues. The computer can be used as a tool for crisis intervention. The computer, on line, is really helping us to initiate and to maintain an ever growing network.

There is a danger here. It is possible to use the computer as a good excuse to avoid and to hide from the personal contact a thriving ministry requires. Computers can be hiding places or they can be tools to assist us in connecting a healthy network.

Along with the modern gadgets that help us connect with people, research reveals an old "tried and true" way that helps to initiate and to maintain a healthy network. That is the publishing of a regular newsletter. There are many formats for putting out a newsletter. They do take some work but are vital to a thriving church and are not the work they used to be with copy machines and efficient keyboards available.

Two helpful resources churches and community groups can use to develop a newsletter that gets read are: The Newsletter's Newsletter and the Joyful Noiseletter. With a subscription to these, a group is freed to publish their clever clippings and cartoons. In both of these there are nationally popular cartoons like, B.C. and Family Circus you can use to spice up your newsletter. Addresses for these will be with the rural resources in the back.

Schaller, in his 30 year study, has shown thriving rural churches have newsletters. A church newsletter serves a number of functions, chief of which is, they help the social network to be informed so that they can be more responsive (Schaller, 1988, p. 55).

In this section the subject of initiating, developing and maintaining a healthy rural network has been the focus. The way to do that is to connect personally and interpersonally with the people of a community. There are, of course, many more



(McPherson, 1995)

ways to connect with people than we have described in this section. The key is to get connected and to stay connected to the people and to be connecting to an ever growing healthy network. The best way to connect with people in a rural area, according to the research, is through regular visitation and community contact. As we move to the next section we want to describe how to access and to utilize a healthy connecting network.

### **ACCESSING A CARING, MINISTERING NETWORK IN THE HEARTLAND**

Accessing a network where there is tender caring and mutual interchange is crucial for the heartland. As was stated in the last section, investing in and maintaining a healthy network is the one most important things that we can do to help in a time of crisis. One of the crises that comes to rural people for which we need to be able to access a healthy network is farm loss.

There is tremendous stress and loss in the heartland. There are families whose "inheritance from God and their hard working ancestors is disintegrating before their eyes. They fear that they are going to be the ones to lose it and, thus, not be able to pass it on to their children" (Burkholder, 1987, p. 36).

Burkholder, a rural Mennonite pastor, goes on to say:

Rural people feel guilt for mismanagement, even if there was none. They feel anger. They link failure with character fault. We must be sensitive to their feelings of failure.

Improbable as it may seem to pressured pastors, farmers regard clergy as secure professionals for whom failure is a flat sermon that can be redeemed next week. Contrast that with the farmer here in my congregation, who, in extricating his \$100,000 combine from a muddy field, literally split it into two pieces. The next morning he committed suicide.

## FORECLOSURE

He paid no heed to the auction sign but moved on,  
Resolute and smiling, into the gathering crowd  
Touched lightly his son's first saddle, passed on to talk with lifetime  
    neighbors  
While the relentless chant of the auctioneer went on unbroken.

He leans against an old hayrack as other neighbors cluster around  
All talking lightly to keep in check  
Deep wellsprings of emotion that threaten to erupt.  
The group shifts, some move away, loath to bid in his presence  
Others pause, touch his shoulder in mute sympathy. He moves on,  
    unseeing,  
His head filled with the torturing chant of the auctioneer  
Whose loud explosive cries of "Sold!" fall like hammer blows on his  
    heart.

His smile remains fixed. He keeps moving,  
Touching the dwindling traces of his lifetime crowded into his spot  
On this day that seems to have no end.  
Only when he sees the old worn plowshare  
His father used to conquer this unbroken land  
Do the tears gather, unshed, magnifying the soul wound mirrored in  
    his eyes.

-Helen Carnell

It is not just the high rollers, poor managers and land speculators staring financial problems in the face. Believers are experiencing their own private Gethsemane, and the pastoral traits needed are vulnerability and empathy. Farmers who fail, like everyone else, need help to understand that personal worth and net worth stand as two different realities in God's eyes.

A key to pastoring in such a setting is to help to create and connect people to appropriate help structures. The ministry of cell groups is possible to deal with a wide range of issues. In previous generations, most farm disasters could be solved through barn raising or work sharing, but individualism now virtually condemns troubled farmers to a lonely fate.

Rural people like these are facing constant crises and the kind of ministry they need goes way beyond what the minister can do solo. As well, solo ministry would not be good modeling. Since having a healthy network is what research supports as being the most helpful in a crisis, then we as pastors do a great disservice to people if we do not model networking.

With the agenda crunch keeping up with the demands on and off the farm, people have a lot less time for each other than they used to. This creates an enormous emotional vacuum and deep hunger for more meaningful interchange with spouses, children, family and friends. Rural people are working very hard and are lonely and get trapped not knowing where to turn for help as presented in the following case study.

This case study adds to the research being presented to demonstrate the need every rural person, group, church and community has to invest and to participate in a healthy network. As well, networks are necessary, as this case study demonstrates, because the availability of accessing good counseling services that larger communities

have is a problem in the heartland. Agria & Jung share part of this story in their rural ministry handbook where Jane Smiley describes a rural person in crisis, quoting from her book, A Thousand Acres:

I looked up psychiatrists in the phone book. There were two listings, one for a clinic in Des Moines, and one for a clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. I dialed the one in Rochester and asked to speak to one of the doctors. I was informed that they were not doctors but therapists and asked to, 'please hold.' While I held the line, I imagined each of us taking turns telling our stories: There would be my husband's impatience, Ty's skepticism, Pete's refusal to say much, Rose's anger, and my own stomach-churning anxiety. I imagined writing checks for large sums of money. I imagined the three-hour drive back. A therapist came on the line, and I knew that I was about to commit myself to what I had once imagined as impossible. I hung up without speaking.

Later she attempted to take her issues to her pastor and here is how that experience went for her:

Our pastor was patient and understanding, that would be just the thing. He wasn't far and the advice would be free, I could stash my story there. The results would come faster than with a therapist, with my pastor there would be some kind of miracle.

Later I stood in the hallway of the parsonage for five minutes. During that time, the phone rang four times, each time interrupting us. He said, 'now Ginny, you mustn't worry. . .' Just then the phone rang again, and as he leaned across the desk to pick up the receiver, his back was to me, I walked, then ran out. I couldn't do it. He was too much himself, too small for his position, too anxious to fit in to our community, too sweaty and dirty and casual and unwise. I started the car and drove out of the parking lot. In my rearview mirror, I could see him trying to wave me back from the door (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 134, 135).

There is not a pastor who is not, "too small for the position!" Interpersonal sharing, support and counseling must be a vital part of the network rural and small town churches help to make accessible. Pastors by themselves are unable to provide all that is needed in this area and it would be unhealthy for them to do so if

they could. Research documents the effectiveness of a caring, counseling network where the pastor participates and lay people help to minister to each other (Tan, 1995 p. 56, 57).

Tan goes on to say this caring network works because it is informal, people obtain support from their friends and neighbors and they themselves can screen and select who they want to talk to about certain issues. The network of people helping and counseling each other helps to build and edify the body of the church. The church and pastor can encourage and help to construct this network. The church and pastor can empower people to use it, participate in it and help people to connect with others depending on the needs and the personal gifts each person offers.

Certainly the pastor and the people will need to be able to refer folk on to professional counseling. Having ties with professional and recommended Christian and secular counselors is all part of the counseling network a rural/small town church can form.

Bangor Liberty Friends has an established successful list of professional counselors people are referred to and are a part of their network. These counselors have sliding scales to help families in financial need. The church, too, has helped to subsidize counseling for families in crisis. As well as referral they have had professional counselors come in to the church to do seminars and to do group therapy to help them with marriage/relationship issues, rural loss and child loss crisis.

In a study on a networking, caring, counseling ministry, John MacDougall talks about the important role of the pastor's spouse. Not every clergy couple would feel this call, but MacDougall emphasizes the advantages for those who like to minister as a team. Clergy couples working as a team are more accessible to people in the church and community. Simply because of personality variance some people will be able to relate to one spouse when they may not be able to relate to the other. When couples



are working as a team there is much less stigma attached to their work and fewer questions about what the pastor is doing behind the closed door or out late at night.

MacDougall is not saying they should shadow each other but would at times work together and at other times they would work independently as an interdisciplinary team. He also warns about falling into the old pattern of expecting the minister's spouse to be free labor for the church. He stresses along with case studies and evaluations that two people working as a team can do far more than double what one can do to build a caring network in a church and community. His case studies show definite and dynamic rural church growth where this model has been applied (MacDougall, 1985, p. i, ii, 18-37).

I've heard it told by those who know horses that a good draft horse can pull up to four tons. However, a good matched pair can pull well over eight tons and even more than 16 tons. In fact, a good matched pair can pull up to 22 tons, almost six times what one horse can pull!

If a team of two working in sync can help connect a healthy network that is more than twice as large as what one pastor can do, how big a network could an interdisciplinary team of church leaders and elders connect? Llowel Bolstad, the rural advocate, talks about the importance of offering peer listening training in a congregation (Bolstad, 1990, p. 33).

As a congregation works together, the network that can be generated will grow incredibly larger. As people who are hurting receive true acceptance, caring, a listening ear and concerned prayer, they in time will become a participant in sharing as well in the network and it will grow!

This caring, counseling network is not just for the crises events and extremely difficult matters that have been described but, too, is for all the many ways people in an active network can help each other. Connecting people with similar problems

and concerns is one of the beautiful opportunities of ministry. As a pastor, if we help people access a connection, interlacing one person with another in a healthy network, then a miracle is being performed! It is the miracle of restoration. The restoration of the Body of Christ is beautiful to see whenever and wherever it happens.

In fact, any time we as pastors try to resolve something for someone, without at some point endeavoring to connect them, as well, to a helping network, then, we have done the person, the church and ourselves a disservice! One of life's most important skills for any of us is to learn how to form and access a healthy network. If we become caretakers for people and fix their problems we are keeping them from learning how to build a network and making them dependent on us. That is very unprofessional and in the end harmful. When the pastor moves or dies, then what happens? If, as pastors, we have left people or are leaving people without a network, then let us ask the Lord to forgive us and let us get about the business of building networks. This task is one of the most exciting, miraculous things a minister can do to help enliven a rural community!

As rural pastors endeavor to restore and to build healthy networks, Agria and Jung identify the most crucial areas as "1) Helping parishioners understand relationships; 2) Helping them clarify options; and 3) Helping them process change" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 121, 122). A healthy network becomes a lab in which to work on all three of these issues and more. People as they learn and practice interconnecting in relationships, help each other to consider more options and support each other in traumatic change.

Another positive factor of networking is it helps in healthy ways to combat loneliness. Sandra Granstrom's study on rural loneliness entitled, "A Comparative Study of Loneliness, Religiosity and Spiritual Well Being,"

is a compelling report. Loneliness is a human condition that many face even in a crowded environment, or in a marriage relationship. Loneliness is pervasive and affects us all. Loneliness affects our physical, emotional and spiritual health. The study reports, contrary to what we like to believe and say about our warm rural cultures, that people here in the heartland are very lonely.

Though there certainly are variables, generally those who are the loneliest in the heartland are: The cancer victim, those whose spouses have chronic illness or disability, and those who are not included and who are isolated from the tight rural community's and church's circle.

The good news is, for those communities and churches that made a concerted effort to network and to include others outside their normal circle, there was substantially less loneliness for them, as well as for the people they included in the network. Where people purposely interact in a faith fellowship and with each other, to share energy, help and hope there is less loneliness. Where there is less loneliness there is better health. Where there is less loneliness, there is less cancer and better recovery to health when it strikes (Granstrom, 1987, p. 12-33, 94, 95).

A healthy, accessible faith network in a community is a safety net, it is comforting, it is healing, it is protective, it allows people to minister to those who need it and to be ministered to in return.

There are many accessible people in the Bangor Liberty Friends network: People who are business and financial experts; people who have relationship building skills; people who are prayer warriors; people who can give computer support; people who can advise on a great recipe; people who can figure just how many sandwiches you can make out of a certain size hog for a graduation celebration; people who are great mechanics; people who have won photography awards and who can do your senior pictures for a fourth of the price and have a good time doing it; people who can do

speech therapy and sign language and people who can tutor your children in subjects they are struggling in.

At Bangor Liberty Friends there are people in the network who can lay a weld on a broken bike making it better and stronger than new and put a smile back on a child's face; there are people who can counsel a rebellious teen; people who have found healing and wholeness from a homosexual lifestyle; people whose child died from A.I.D.S. and who know the agony; people who have lost their children in death; people who are finding victory from alcohol abuse; people who are finding significant healing and help for depression; people who still struggle greatly with depression but who find help meeting together in the faith network; people who have struggled through suicidal times; and the list could go on! Tremendous resources can be discovered in every rural church and community. Together let us connect networks, access them and we will see miracles!

There was a recent study done on what is required to revitalize a rural congregation funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and published in 1995 by the Center for Theology and Land. In that study lay people ministering to each other was more important than the pastor's quality of preaching. In fact, participation of lay people was the number one thing on the list as "indispensable" (Jung & Kirst, 1995, p.24, 25).

Frances Martin who has been a life-time member and leader among Friends in Iowa was helping me with this project as I began. Since then she has been diagnosed with brain cancer which is very aggressive. The last words she could write to me are written in marks that were obviously painful for her to make on the cover page of one of the first drafts. For the renewal of the rural church and community and to keep them thriving, Frances writes, "We must each be examples of exchange, communicating and breaking down barriers to know each other for a thriving community to develop."

Concurring with Frances in one of the newest and best texts on organizational behavior, (copyright, 1996), Shani and Lau state that for creativity and effectiveness a group must become a team that openly shares, leveling with each other ( Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M11-15). In Advancing the Smaller Church, (copyright, 1957), we find "the effective smaller church is a group of interacting persons. The people as a whole participate in the life of the church and in the community building up each other's character" (Mavis, 1957, p. 25, 26). In 40 years the message for healthy groups is basically the same.

Brett Sutton writes, warning, we in rural churches and communities often miss the miracles we could have and often manage to divide the Indivisible. Instead of building healthy networks and community cohesion in a spirit of reconciliation, we dispose of highly charged and controversial matters as quickly as possible. Requests for help, need and responses for the same, all are required to flow through the "conductivity of dissent" which are strict, unchanging church/community communication channels. Sutton says that in these systems much is made of "unity" and there is an appearance of "unity" but honest unity is non-existent under the surface. He reminds us in his final analysis the church is an "assembly," not "a single entity" (Sutton, 1990, p. 197, 201, 202, 204, 217-219).

There is a traditional assumption that rural communities naturally offer social support but just because an area is rural does not mean there is a healthy networking community (Jobes, 1992, p. 190, 191). There usually exists the guise of a network in most rural communities and churches, but a real, working, caring network that includes a growing group of people is, sad to say, rarer than we would like to believe or admit.

Bolstad challenges us to connect healthy networks and to access them and to "move from competition towards cooperation, from contract towards covenant" (Bolstad, 1988, p. 86, 87).

Besides the interpersonal contacts to connect a growing network and to access it, there are some mechanical means to help a group access its "net".

The Ministry and Counsel of Bangor Liberty Friends has developed a phone prayer chain. When any one receives news that merits the attention or the prayer of our network there is an organized and concerted effort to focus prayer on what the concern may be. Miracles have been recorded because people have connected through prayer. The phone chain can work for good news, too, as people share exciting moments in their lives.

Another device Bangor Liberty Friends uses to access its network is an attendance list that is kept for each worship service. Members of Ministry and Council and other volunteers maintain and keep the list. Carefully they note to see who is present for Sunday School and for worship services. If anyone misses, they automatically get a bulletin in the mail, sometimes with a note if it is known they are sick or there is some problem. If they miss more than once, then some response generates from the network to see how things are. Are they OK, is there an illness or a problem?

Another device that is used to help people access the faith network here is a list of prospective people to invite and endeavor to help connect in the "net". This list is formed by keeping records of visitors; people who have demonstrated interest in the faith network; family members and friends who are not connected to any faith network and who are remembered in prayer and visited for possible involvement in the network; associate members who are reaching the age to become active members;

new people in the community; etc. All of the people on this list are bathed in prayer in the Ministry and Counsel Meetings. As elders sense a leading they choose names to specifically call or visit.

What has been described in this section are just a few of the positive aspects of establishing and participating in a healthy faith network. A healthy faith network finds ways to respond.

### **CREATING A "CARE-FRONTING" NETWORK IN THE HEARTLAND:**

If the caring that motivates our response is genuine, then our response and our networking will not just be supportive, encouraging and embracing but, too, will require accountability and responsibility. These two words are not very popular today in our society but very important to have a healthy network and to have a thriving church and community. In fact we in the church are guilty of not holding each other accountable enough. For us as Friends this is certainly true. We want freedom and flexibility and encouragement but do not like the sound of accountability and responsibility.

To blend and balance both ideas of being caring and requiring responsibility I am borrowing the term "care-fronting" (Augsburger, 1973, p. 9) from Dr. David Augsburger, professor, counselor and author. Augsburger has written a series of books that help us with personal and organizational relationships and behavior. He coins the term "care-fronting" in one of the books of the series entitled Caring Enough to Confront.

For connecting a healthy network that can "care-front," we in rural areas must first acknowledge there is conflict in our communities and our churches. It is difficult for us as rural people to be honest about conflict. For those of us who are multigenerational Quakers, it may be hard to face our own conflicts. Since we have

been raised on a regular diet that has included good helpings of peace at home, at church and in our Quaker schools; and since we are supposed to be nice and caring; and since we are supposed to be listening and prayerful and wait on the Spirit; and since we have been presented with that picture and ideal from the time we can first remember; it is, then, difficult for some of us to acknowledge there is rude conflict in our network, in our meeting/church and deep within our own self.

We Quakers are not the only ones with this problem. Most rural churches, groups and communities do not acknowledge their conflict and controversy, let alone begin to process it in a healthy way. To build an effective, healthy network in a church and community there must be the acceptance of and the processing of controversy. "In rural communities with a high degree of acquaintanceship there is a great deal of homogeneity, or a high degree of overlap among the different roles community members perform" (Flora & Flora, 1990, p. 4).

For example, one of the leading elders of our church is a local lawyer and farmer who does his business in our community, is involved in politics, coaches a Little League baseball team, is involved in the school, leads two committees in our church, helps teach Sunday School, is involved in 4-H, has livestock, shows livestock in local and state fairs, and, last but not least, as I am frequently reminded, has a son my daughter likes. We are good friends and he is just one example of the many people who are very involved in our community. With all those circles overlapping there will be controversy and conflict for each of us and for our network to process. People who bump into each other as much as we do in rural areas as we move briskly through our busy agenda will cause some personal bruising.

Because of our tendency to repress controversy instead of processing differences of opinion in healthy ways, when disagreements do surface, they have been nurtured



so long they, at times, burst into the open as full-fledged conflicts. This often deeply splits old friends, a community political campaign, a committee and sometimes even splitting the church and community (Flora & Flora, 1990, p. 4).

Some of the festering points for conflict usually have to do with the school, school mergers and school board decisions. Other hot beds are the active political parties, the hurt and frustration that come with politics and local elections. Major church decisions that institute change are bound to bring controversy. Then there will be some fun surprises. Some little thing you may think would bother no one will end up causing an explosion that starts lots of fires.

The main thing is to expect controversy. A rural community and church are going to have plenty of it. Controversy and conflict are not going to go away, they are going to be a part of the regular process of life and of networking in the heartland.

There is good news. Tension and conflict are indicators there is life! Thank the Lord! Where there is no tension at all there is either denial, dishonesty or death. So the cat's out of the bag friends. Rural churches, Friends churches and communities have LOTS OF CONFLICT. That is a healthy sign. Hopefully we will choose to deal with our conflicts in a process that is healthy, though we will make mistakes that hurt people. That is a given, but I for one am not willing to go back to the days when we pretended to be at peace.

Does recognizing and admitting we have conflict mean we should not stand for peace in our world? Certainly we should, as much as ever, even more than ever! But this model, too, means we are going to be honest in admitting and processing the conflict that is a part of our daily life. Actually this model is much better because as we develop and connect networks that can "care-front," then we will be modeling something very valuable that others and the world needs to see.

For all of us who are pastors, leaders and participants in rural church and community networks, it is important to see the summary in the study entitled Subjugation in Rural Stratified Communities," by David Gilmore:

"Ethical problems and conflict are inherent while working in rural communities. At times these problems will become prominent. With conflict, be it political, class oriented, interpersonal, or whatever, to maintain neutrality will not always be possible.

In fact, to these problems there are no definite solutions, and change agents will have to learn to live with tension in such environments -- as do the people themselves. Learning to tolerate stress is part of the participant process. Can one maintain neutrality in such situations? Is there the danger of association as we endeavor to represent both the dominate and the dominated? How can one avoid the impression of collusion? Finally, how does one honestly confront the epistemological implications of one's own sympathies?

The levels and the lines of such situations are not clear cut. Peer pressure will compel on both sides. Those who appear to communicate with one side will be defined as traitors by the other side and be ostracized by them.

Those engaging as change agents in their own, or in another culture will need prudence and sensitivity. They will need to discover cleavages and tensions. They will need to be able to tactfully filter down from the top as well as work up from the bottom. They will need to be able to watch silently but attentively. They will need to be able to make friends of everyone and learn more about the people and their past as they associate with those on different levels, in the bar/restaurants, in the libraries, in the schools and in the churches.

All sides will have hidden agendas. A holistic rendering of reality is an ambition that is seldom achieved.

Expect a few modest successes and many egregious failures" (Gilmore, 1991, p. 215-222).

As participants in healthy church and community networking, be prepared for criticism, a "few successes" and many glaring "failures."

In the next chapter we will emphasize the importance of people-participative decision making as a way of modifying our position as a target for criticism. Including others within the network concerning decisions and actions is vitally important to all

of us in a healthy church/community. It is important to those of us who are pastors who want to make a commitment to a place for the long haul and want to avoid having to leave or being made into a scape goat and thus forced out of a community.

There is another way a pastor may suffer as a scape goat. "While a parishioner may feel deep-seated anger or resentment toward a fellow churchgoer, to express that may be difficult, since the two need to 'get along' as neighbors. The pastor, in such cases, often becomes the most likely target for all the anger and repressed conflict" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 204).

With the constant conflicts small town and rural communities have, there is a positive note that sounds the importance and the role of the church. The church is the best control agent for conflicts that are a part of the overlapping boundaries of rural life. "The power of the church as a sponsor of communitarian values and the extensive overlap of church and community operates to control the ideology of independence and the negative consequences of living so close as neighbors" (Ellis, 1984, p. 507). Ellis goes on to say that rural churches can operate in unhealthy ways, being an isolator when conflict arises, or the church can, in healthy ways, be an "insulator" to allow proper flow of conduct and keep sparks from flying in intertwined circuits (p. 508, 514).

After the honest admission that there is controversy and conflict in our rural communities and churches, then we can get on with the network "care-fronting" process. There are many controversies and conflicts the healthy network will "care-front" and process. The length and focus of this project, however, will not allow a complete list. "Care-fronting" is a natural response toward those we find in the intersection of possibility because the living, active Word *indwells* us.

One of the issues we need to "care-front" in the heartland is the issue of spousal and child physical and sexual abuse. The social isolation of women and of

children that is imposed by the perpetrators and often, unknowingly, by the church and community contributes to the environment where abuse happens. The social and geographical isolation of rural life exacerbates the risks and the violence in rural homes.

An eight-year study of domestic violence in a rural Wisconsin county describes the problem:

Women in rural areas are isolated from the public services their urban sisters take for granted. The research shows that law enforcement personnel remain reluctant to protect women from abusive partners; that local churches frequently do not offer support to victims within their congregations; that rural families are especially isolated in times of emergency due to the distance between neighbors; that typically conservative rural communities resist acknowledging and dealing with social problems such as domestic violence; and that the outlook for increased funding of services and shelter for rural women escaping domestic violence is grim.

If a battered wife desired non-legal intervention on her behalf, the primary resources available to her within the county were her family, personal physician or a minister. There was no organization as such mandated to meet this need. Legal interventions, (i.e., filing criminal complaints and having the abuser arrested), were the only available alternatives. Divorce was a very expensive option, carrying social stigma and not easily entered into by less affluent women.

Women interviewed in this study would not come to the county mental health clinic because of the possible stigma of being considered 'mentally ill' by their neighbors. A large percentage of the victims lived more than 11 miles from the nearest town and had no access to transportation at the time of the abuse. Over half of them had no supportive family in the area and over a third of them did not have any sympathetic neighbors.

One woman, lacking a phone and car was beaten and raped in her rural farm home by her estranged husband. She escaped but was forced to spend the night in the woods before she was finally able to obtain help the next morning from a neighbor.

When they are called, the attitude of the police and sheriff's officers and their willingness to respond rapidly can make the difference between life and death for rural women and children. The women in the study reported, overall, that local law officers frequently

did not take it seriously. Usually the officers feel that the women are in little danger or that they do not deserve protection. The idea of the woman as 'the property of her husband' is still strongly imbedded in the minds of the patrolmen.

**In over half the cases of family homicide, police assistance had been requested at least five times prior to the slaying.** In some cases the officers had refused to respond to a victim's call for assistance. In some cases the responding officers took an exceptionally long time, longer than the most direct measured route would normally take, arriving at the scene of the violence. The above cases were especially true when the woman had requested help numerous times. The study shows the attitude of the local police force as one of the biggest stumbling blocks to ending domestic abuse in the county.

Another problem is that prominent members of the community resist participating in the process of assisting and empowering women who are being abused. They do not like to draw attention to something so negative in their tranquil countryside. They seldom will openly acknowledge the problem.

**Another part of the community cited by the study as contributing to the condition of abused women is the church.** The attitudes of religious institutions led to churches being silent participants in wife beating. Of the women who did ask for help from the pastor/priest or leader of a church, the overwhelming majority were told to, 'go back home and try to work it out.' The reasons cited most frequently were, 'Christian duty, the authority of the husband, and the unacceptability of divorce within their faith.' Most of the women who did report their plight to some member of the church were not believed. This was the case especially if the abuser attended church regularly.

The case of one abused farm wife illustrates the findings of the study. During her marriage of more than 20 years, rearing five children, her husband severely abused her both emotionally and physically. He controlled her use of the truck and car, seldom allowing her to go to town alone. This man also forced an incestuous relationship upon two of his daughters. Because he was very visibly involved in church and community affairs, their congregation found it difficult to believe that such a 'fine' man could treat his family poorly. He was such a 'good neighbor' that the family across the road, having never witnessed the abuse, did not believe the woman's report against her husband. The woman, who finally found help, was able to move into a shelter where, with her children, she was safe but which isolated her from her community and her church. The people continued to view the man as a very active Christian and continued to give him very high regard in the church and community. Legally, the man

could not have contact with his wife or one child and was only allowed short contact with the other children. Yet people in the church and community continued to view him like always and socialized with him and allowed him to continue to participate in everything, while isolating the woman and children. (Feyen, 1989, p. 17-30).

The above study summarizing the reaction of the church and community said: "The important social dimension in small towns is the desire to be seen as normal and nice, even conventional" (Feyen, 1989, p. 17). This desire leads to an apparent friendliness that masks deep pain. The faithful wearing of the "nice" and friendly mask keeps us from addressing the issue of abuse. The faithful wearing of the mask keeps us from responding in care and drawing the true victim(s) into the network. The faithful wearing of the mask keeps us from "care-fronting" the perpetrator(s) and holding them accountable and responsible. Wearing the mask keeps us from processing through to any tangible solutions.

As Bangor Liberty Friends is endeavoring to "care-front" this problem they have addressed it in worship by having personal sharing of victims and victim's spouses and in messages by the pastor; they are praying for the victims who are known in their prayer/share meetings; they include the victims who are known in their "net" support system and they use safe shelters for abused women when possible, (though there are none in the proximate area).

As a male pastor in a rural area, there are several ladies I can call and who will come immediately so that a woman is present when we are responding to spousal abuse. When the authorities check the woman's body as they verify the abuse to arrest the abuser, it is very dehumanizing. The authorities, for us in rural areas, are sheriffs or deputies who are men. As a part of our "care-fronting" network, we feel it very important to have a caring woman's presence standing or sitting right next to the abused woman when she has to expose herself to the official as well as remaining

with her all through the process. We have them do the examination in a room that at least guarantees some privacy to the woman and I make myself absent when they are examining her. It is so important to respond to those who are isolated and being hurt in the heartland. Our church is becoming known as a safe base. Women are discovering if they can let us know in some way, or get here, they will be safe.

As in the Wisconsin study we have found one of our biggest problems is the attitude of our rural law enforcement agencies. On one occasion a Marshall County deputy responded to our call when we had an abused woman, obviously beaten, who had been able to escape and had come to our church for help. The perpetrator was on a drug binge and still had the two little children in the home and the woman was frantic to get the man out so the children would be safe.

When the deputy who responded to the call arrived, (taking much longer to drive the distance than it would for me to leisurely drive to town), checked the woman's wounds and was apprised of the situation, he said, "No, we're not going to the house, she has to come to town with me first, because she has an outstanding traffic violation and fine." I simply could not believe it. I had to threaten to call the sheriff and demand that he go, as the new law requires, arrest the perpetrator and make sure the children were OK and allow the woman to be with her children. Before he would allow that, I had to promise to bring the woman in later to take care of the outstanding traffic violation. All of that process took up much valuable time. The perpetrator was finally arrested, the children were OK and the woman did pay her fine but I could not believe the attitude of the deputy. It amazes me that an unpaid traffic fine took precedence in the deputy's mind over the danger to the children!

In another situation an abused woman was able to make it to the Union Library which is another safe base for women in our community. The man was drunk and

tearing up the house. When the director of the library called the Hardin County Sheriff, he would not even respond or come to the scene.

In a rural area we have to consider all of the above as we network together with others to create safe bases for women and children who are being hurt and "care-front" the problems of spouse and child abuse.

Another important area for us to "care-front" is rural poverty. In our faith network a group of concerned volunteers work together and are local distributors of a state-wide, non-profit, food cooperative called SHARE Iowa. For just \$14 a month and two hours of community service, people can get several sacks of food items, which include staples, fresh fruit, vegetables and meat. Or, for \$9 a month they can get the vegetarian provision. There are a growing number of families who participate in this program and who volunteer to keep it going. The groceries are trucked into our site from the distribution point. Here, one of our adult Sunday school classes work with the other volunteers as a ministry to organize, sack and to distribute the groceries to those participating in the program.

SHARE Iowa is a "care-fronting" program because along with helping to put inexpensive but quality food on the table of a number of homes, it requires that the participants become involved in healthy networking and participate in community service by helping others. You will find information for contacting SHARE Iowa in the rural resources in the back of this study.

Another area a healthy rural network could "care-front" is sports gambling. There is a powerful undercurrent in rural areas that is very involved in sports gambling. Some of this is innocent fun. It can grow into a monster that is very frightening, however. Growing up, I enjoyed sports and still do, but we have become inebriated with sports in our society.



The danger of sports gambling was brought to my attention when a man in our rural community was murdered. The crime went unsolved, but left several shaking in their boots. The murder is assumed to be organized crime related, and the man who died had been an integral part of an extensive sports gambling network right here in the heartland.

In visiting with several who had become involved in this network, I learned they had started innocently. As time went by, they became more and more involved. We had several right here locally who were keeping "book" for this network. Some of them realized they had a problem, were in over their head and were scared. Some, who had gotten involved keeping "book" and getting bigger cuts of the pie were simply trying to figure out ways to get more income.

Two of those who were very involved as "bookies" in the sports gambling network have given that up and have committed themselves, instead, to a healthy network. They are, now, very involved both in church and community organizations, reaching out to help others and are great examples of the transformation that can happen with the living *indwelling* Word.

We have addressed this concern from time to time in the pulpit. Sports gambling is much more pervasive in our rural areas and churches than what we acknowledge and needs to be "care-fronted" by a healthy network.

Another area that needs to be "care-fronted" in the heartland is racial prejudice. In a study done in 1990 entitled Violent Hate Groups in Rural America, it is evident that in place of less prejudice, there is growing prejudice in rural America. In fact, "the KKK, the neo-Nazis, the Populist Party and a variety of theopolitical organizations are networking, spreading conspiracy theories, promoting militia groups and spreading hate and violence in rural America" (Young, 1990, p. 16).

The study continues that their combined efforts are focused on the "Golden Triangle", the rural area surrounded by a line drawn between: Pittsburgh; Atlanta; Western Texas; and the mountainous north west point of the Montana/Idaho border. The study reports a dramatic rise in the increase of hate/racial crimes of 150%; and of survivalist militias in this "triangle." The string of black churches being burnt in the south and the Freeman frustrating the F.B.I. in Montana are just samples of what hate groups are doing in the heartland.

In an interview with the Grand Dragon of the KKK in 1992, he said rural cities and towns are "ripe for new members" (Fruhling, 1992, p. 1). The Palimpsest, Iowa's Popular History Magazine, dedicated an entire issue to the history of the KKK in Iowa because of this rising concern. They show pictures and print names of Klan leaders from the beginning of the growing movement in Iowa since the 1920s and on. The revealing articles show the intentional goals of the Klan for getting members into businesses and churches (Goodenow, 1995, p. 53). It even shows pictures of small children proudly dressed up in the white robes and pointed hats of the KKK.

Five years ago Bangor Liberty Friends had some members of a multiracial family start to attend the Sunday School and church. They had recently moved into the community and started attending the school and they were visited by the church and invited to come. Not long after that the oldest boy found a note in his things at school. The note was written from some other students and was obviously intended to intimidate, to make him feel bad and hopefully to make him leave. The language of the note is too terrible to include in this document, but it spoke very crassly of him having incestuous relationships with his mother and sister and fathering a child by them. It ordered his family out of the community or he would be killed and was signed by the KKK.

The boy, afraid and not knowing what to do, showed the note to me as his pastor. I personally went to the principal of the school and showed the note to him as well as to the ministerial alliance of our community. It was at that point, together as rural churches, that we began to work with the school in coming up with a no harassment policy that went into affect on the buses and in every school activity.

During a four-week period coordinated between the area churches and the school we discussed this matter of harassment and teasing in each Sunday School class and from the pulpits. At this same time the school worked with the staff, the teachers and the students. It was made clear that harassment or teasing of any of the students by any of the staff, teachers or by each other would not be tolerated. As well, harassment and teasing were included on the list of things that would earn students misconduct slips and detention time. Sunday School teachers and school teachers were oriented to watch for harassment and teasing and to intervene to stop it if they ever observed it in the classroom, the hallways, the dressing rooms, before or after school or on school or church property. Some excused teasing saying the kids have always been mean to each other and have teased each other especially in the middle school/junior high years. We agreed that was true but now was the time to endeavor to reverse the trend and to try to stop harmful teasing.

I am not about to say we have done away with prejudice and harmful teasing in our community. We still have a long way to go in that department. But we made a big dent as we all worked together those four weeks. The subjects of teasing, harassment and prejudice need to be addressed, named, and Christian "care-fronting" begun. Networking together, "care-fronting" issues, we will have a bigger impact on our community.

The issue of prejudice can not be pushed under the rug or denied because we live in a friendly agrarian society. William Petroski, in the Des Moines Register,

reports that Iowa Militia's Numbers Are Seen Rising. This last November, 1995, even after the Oklahoma City bombing, there was a big conference promoting racial purity, militia groups and the survivalist cause in Marshalltown, IA, at the Regency Inn. John Trochmann, of the militia of Montana and a national organizer, was brought in. He pumped the large crowd, attracted a cheering response and fueled the fires of fear and hate with the conspiracy theory that is found prevalent in their literature and teaching. These kinds of promotions are going on all over the "Golden Triangle" right now and many people are content to be unaware.

As Trochmann ran through a lengthy list of alleged governmental wrong doings "members of the all-white, mostly older male audience repeated 'Amen' as he spoke. 'How do you impeach the president?' asked Trochmann. Another man replied, 'With a .30-06!' referring to a high powered hunting rifle."

Petroski continues reporting that "Trochmann gave a speech in 1990 to the white-supremacist Aryan Nations' World Congress" and that "Trochmann's visit to Iowa alarmed Pat Eddy, project director for PrairieFire, a rural Iowa activist group." Petroski, reported Eddy's concern over the Marshalltown conference:

Trochmann is one of the most dangerous militia organizers in the United States. I talk with farmers on our crisis line and they tell me the militia isn't a bad thing and maybe it's time for people to start taking back what is theirs. Enough of what the militia says is true to draw people in and then the blame can be focused on anything. (Petroski, 1995, p. 1 & 7A).

The research indicates that hate, prejudicial and militia groups are on the rise in rural America. It is our challenge to promote healthy networks that "care-front" the agenda of hate that is focused on the "Golden Triangle" of the heartland. Sing along with me, won't you: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow black and white, they are precious in His sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world" (Root, 1944, p. 61).

Now let us move beyond just singing and put "feet to our prayer" and to our singing and participate in networking that does not leave room for prejudice in our community.

Another area that needs to be "care-fronted" in the heartland is farm safety. After the devastating farm/rural related accidents that took two of their children the people of Bangor Liberty Friends have become farm safety advocates. Certain ones in the church have had farm safety seminars and "walk arounds" where adults with children are guided all over the farm and danger potentials are pointed out. U.S. Senator Tom Harkin was invited and did come to one of the "walk arounds," helping to draw a good attendance to the event.

Farm safety videos have been placed in the church and community libraries by the faith network and people are encouraged to view them as families and then to do a "farm safety walk around" with their children and grandchildren on their farms. Brochures promoting farm safety are passed out in the Spring and in the Fall when rural activity is at its highest and when we are most at risk. In Bible studies, church services and in community functions, prayer is given in the Spring and in the Fall for farm safety to help raise awareness and caution levels.

There are many other important issues we need to name and to "care-front," from how to get an A.T.M. in a rural area to the W.I.C. program but space will not allow us. There is more helpful reference in rural resources in the back.

The focus of this section, however, is not in attempting to name and address all the necessary issues, but rather on the importance of investing in, maintaining and accessing a healthy caring and a "care-fronting" faith network. The response of a network to help, heal, protect, encourage and love as well as to hold accountable and

# You Don't Have To Die

"This has been a very tragic time for my family and me," wrote Garnet Pfaff, whose husband was killed in a farming accident last October. "But if what I can tell you will help save others from going through what we had to, it will be worth it."

Similar words poured in by mail and phone from the families of farm accident victims as we began work on this special section. They offered warnings

and heartfelt pleadings to other farm families to avoid mistakes or careless actions.

If your family's farmers won't listen when you suggest that they be careful, give this article to them. It just might save a life.

## Know Your Machinery's Limitations

"Check, check, check," the families told us.

"I plead with all farmers and others to check everything possible before you climb aboard a tractor or any farm machinery," says Virginia Sadler of Gallatin, Tenn. Her husband, Loyd, was killed when the tractor he was

driving stalled on a hill, rolled backward, and flipped over.

"Keep up preventive maintenance on your machinery," advises Kenneth Reynolds of Sperry, Okla., who lost an eight-year-old son.

"Keep a logbook of all that is done to each piece of equipment."

Updating old equipment is just as important, says Cindi Kraeger, of Port Leyden, N.Y.

"If we hadn't been using such an old wagon . . .," she says, remembering the accident that took her husband's life in November 1989. "It didn't have safety levers."

## Know Your Physical Limitations

It's a good idea for farmers to keep their own health evaluated and maintained and to check about the possible side effects of medicine before operating machinery. The effects of medication may have cost Noble Pryor his life.

"I had noticed he wasn't getting around too well," Ella Jean Pryor remembers about the days before her husband's tractor accident. "I think his medicine was too strong; it had just been changed the week before."

She surmises that the medication's effects may have caused him to fall from the tractor and into the path of a rotary mower.

Hearing problems may have contributed to the death of Wisconsin farmer Ward Pfaff.

"He wore a hearing aid," says his wife, Garnet. "When noise was too loud, he always turned it down. He may have had it turned down because of the loud noise of the combine."

Pfaff was following the machine to check for harvest losses and was killed when the combine operator backed the machine to start a new row of corn.

"Ward probably didn't even hear the combine or realize it was so close," says Garnet.

## Use a Buddy System

"If he hadn't been alone . . .," some of the relatives wished in their letters and phone calls. In some instances, they believed that the accident might have been avoided. In others, they wondered whether life-saving help could have been summoned more quickly.

Although realistically farmers can't



always avoid working alone, someone should know a farmer's schedule and where he will be working, suggest some farm families.

"One bit of advice I would like to impress upon farmers is to work in pairs whenever possible," says Diane Witt of Hawarden, Iowa. The body of her husband, Mark, was discovered by his father after an accident that pinned him between a tractor and a corn head.

William Keith Gilman was dead when his son found him after a wagon of silage fell on him.

Says Gilman's wife, Lovetta, "Because he brought the tractor and the chopper back to the house, I didn't know where he was. I thought he was somewhere close by, so it was awhile before we found him. If he and my son had been there together, maybe it wouldn't have happened."

### Use Common Sense

Hardly a farmer can say he hasn't done *something* that he knew wasn't safe when he did it, in the interest of saving some time or effort. For many families, that moment of risk turns into a lifetime of heartache.

"Please think before you reach over or into things that spin," says Cindi Kraeger. Her husband, Peter, was killed when his gloves or coat caught on one of the beater bars in a self-unloading silage wagon. "The good Lord gave you a brain, so use it. Don't waste it or yourself."

Gertrude Walczuk saw the tractor turnover accident that took her husband's life.

"It was right in our front yard, and I saw the whole thing," she says. "He decided to move this tree, and it was too big. It was poor judgement, I have to say it."

"You can't warn somebody if they won't listen," she continues, "People don't need to think it won't happen to them."

Jerry Gabriel, widow of a farmer strangled in a corn picker, advises farmers to think of loved ones when they take risks during farming.

"It's so hard to be the one left behind," she points out. "When you get out there in the field, you have to be careful. Because if you're not, your family's life will never be the same."

## Please Be Careful—We Need You

All the safety seminars, instruction manuals, and warning labels in the world can't influence a farmer as much as a simple, sincere plea from his young child or concerned wife. We at *Progressive Farmer* suggest you sit down and write a letter to the busy farmer in your family. Tell him how you feel about him and why it's impor-

tant that he be especially careful this harvest season and in the seasons to come.

Words don't always come easily, so we've prepared a suggested letter. Use it to write your own, or just fill in the blanks, and hand the letter to your loved one as he heads for the fields.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I'm writing this letter because sometimes you get so busy you may not hear my words. I guess this is the most hectic time of the year for us. It's also one of the most dangerous.

That's what this letter is about. I'm asking you to be careful. We both know farmers who were killed or injured because they side-stepped safety procedures. I don't want our family to be on that casualty list this fall—or ever.

With so much to do, it's tempting, I know, to finish those last few rows even though you're so tired you can't see straight. Or you may want to try to unclog a machine quickly without turning it off.

When you do something you know is risky—even once—then it's easier to do it a second time. And then a third. With each time, our family's chance of losing you grows greater.

I want you around, \_\_\_\_\_, to enjoy this beautiful land God has given us, to rejoice in our family's good times, and to support each other during the bad ones. Don't let some fleeting, careless moment tear you from us.

I'm asking you to remember this letter every day when you head to the fields. If you start to do something you know is unsafe, think about what our lives would be like without you. Think about the future with us that you'll miss if your life is cut short. Are the extra minutes you'll save worth the price we might all pay?

I want us to share many more autumn harvests and spring plantings. So don't take it lightly when I tell you to please be careful—we need you. I'm counting on you to remember what's most important in life.

I love you \_\_\_\_\_,

as responsible is the response of the living, active Word *indwelling* a person, a group, a church and a community in the heartland. It is the response of healthy networking that keeps a church and community alive and thriving.

## **HEARTLAND PREACHING, TEACHING AND PROGRAMMING FLOW FROM NETWORKING**

In the scope of this thesis the subjects of preaching, teaching and programming are not a major emphasis. Those subjects certainly are important. It is vital to have messages that are prayed over and researched and prepared. For us as Friends, it is also important to have Scripturally based messages that are Cristo-centric which takes time with the Word. What often happens, however, in the life of the pastor and the church is we spend much time going to seminars learning and growing; we spend much time in study and preparing services and messages; we spend much time on church programming but according to the research, that is not the key to build rural churches! Again, seminars and personal growth are important. What we are doing, however, is relegating visitation and community contacts to a lesser place, when according to research, they should be the most important. Visitation, community contacts and networking should be the "bread and butter" of the rural church, pastor and leader!

In fact, as pastors and leaders we can **not** preach, teach or program effectively unless we are regularly visiting and contacting people in the community. It does not make any difference how eloquent a pastor may be; it does not make any difference how scholarly the message may be; it does not make any difference how much study time went into preparation, the message will miss its mark if it does not flow from being in touch with people.



The people may listen politely and compliment the pastor but many messages beat the air, go nowhere and make absolutely no difference. A message, however, that flows from the living, active Word *dwelling with* the people will have transforming power. That was what Jesus did and that is what will make the transforming difference in our messages. A pastor simply can not produce the kinds of messages being referred to here avoiding people and hiding from them. Study, work, hobbies, cleaning, repair, (to mention just a few), can become convenient hiding places away from people. As well, anything we do can become a connecting point with people and help put us on their level. Is what we do a hiding place from people or a connecting point with people? Certainly, as stated before, leaders and pastors need time away from people but as Jesus did. Then, however, we need to come back to the intersection of possibility, listening to people and engaging them in transforming conversation.

Transforming messages and program will naturally flow from healthy networking. Healing messages and programming will flow as we who are pastors and leaders engage people in regular, personal dialogue, listening to them. Serving as a consultant, I was asked by a pastor how it is possible to come up with good material to speak on. "I have so much trouble knowing what to speak about," he said. As I listened to him I asked about visitation. "That is a problem too," he said. We came to some conclusions together and he committed to making and maintaining two engaging contacts a week. Following up later he reported a new joy in knowing what to share and having messages that were making a difference. He is the same preacher, using the same preaching style, but now his messages flow from his active engagement with the people and that is transforming for him and for the congregation.

I am doing a series right now that is having an impact for which I thank the Lord and our faith network for helping me to have the original idea. Earlier in the year I had thought I would do something completely different as I was planning for this calendar time. Later, however, as I was visiting with a young man in our church who was quite bothered by the accidental farm death of one of his young friends this year, a different need and subject surfaced. He wanted to know about heaven and about how we could tell when the end of time would be near. As we visited it seemed to be a leading we both sensed to have a series on that subject in our worship services after Easter. As we have started the series the young man, who previously had not been very regular in church attendance, has not missed a service. He has brought friends and has personally shared in one of the services.

For us as pastors and leaders, messages and program need to originate out of our conversations with other people and speak to their needs and not originate out of our own needs and "stuff"! I've heard many messages that were really therapy for the pastor as he/she was addressing their own issues. The pastor needs to do that, but somewhere else, not in the pulpit. Likewise I have heard many messages that cranked on the favorite "soapbox" themes of the pastor. Transforming heartland messages that help to build thriving churches and communities, however, flow out of our visitation, our conversations with people and networking as we listen to the needs of those around us.

This chapter has been dedicated to what connects a genuine caring response from a person, leader, pastor, group or church to the people of an area. What best connects a caring response to bring light and life is a healthy network. A thriving rural church and community connect and access a healthy network from and for the heartland.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### MAKING DECISIONS AND MANAGING ORGANIZATIONS IN THE HEARTLAND

There is a cup sitting beside a desk in a rural minister's office that reads: "If you don't get confused around here, you're just not trying!" It does get confusing making decisions in rural and small town churches and communities. Whether one is working as part of a committee or group or whether one is working on a project alone, there are seldom simple solutions.

Creative heartland decisions and management for thriving rural organizations come from: Forming and managing creative organizations; "communication dialoguing" which involves others in people-participative programming and; taking care not to sabotage our own organization.

Heartland decisions for thriving organizations require a mix of our best rational, our feelings, our intuition and creativity all of which is stirred by the moving of the living, active Spirit of God *indwelling* a group.

Let's put our spoon in the primordial soup from which new life can spring for any organization and give it a stir and see what it consists of.

#### A CREATIVE ORGANIZATIONAL MIX

Creativity is necessary to keep any organization thriving and to keep it from merely surviving or from dying. "In the beginning..." there was formlessness, emptiness and darkness. But God's Spirit was moving. God is still the same. Part of God's nature is to create. He can still bring forth life from nothing. In our organizational meetings, if we allow, God's *indwelling* Spirit can yet bring new life.

A form that allows the freedom and moving of the Spirit is a generator of creativity. Too much form and we become lost in "vain repetition," which Jesus specifically indicated we should avoid in Mt. 6:7. On the other hand, too much freedom will not keep us on task sufficiently to bring any creative idea to application. It is not a matter of whether form or freedom is more important for creation, but rather a matter of balancing form and freedom to get a creative mix.

Shani and Lau suggest a process that provides for both form and freedom and includes the common denominators of researched, scientifically creative methods:

- 1) Studying the problem area to realize its different aspects.
- 2) Saturating the brain with all available data.
- 3) Allowing incubation time during which the cognitive process at the unconscious level reforms and reshapes the data.
- 4) Awaiting enlightenment (insight).
- 5) Hypotheses testing (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M15-7).

Scientific studies show uneducated and unskilled workers following this procedure can come up with innovative insights to better their work and work site. These studies have reframed the idea of creativity which "ordinarily is reserved for exceptional individuals and extraordinary accomplishments. Now we recognize it in the practical problem-solving activities of ordinary people introducing a new perspective from which to grasp the challenge of the ordinary" (Shane & Lau, 1996, p. M15-9).

Testing today reveals any of us can be creative, no matter what our intelligence level. In the newly released manual, "Behavior in Organizations," there are significant and new results to studies on creativity. The essential components of creativity are listed, which follow in summary:

A creative person has to want to do something about the problem, have dedicated work habits, have a high level of curiosity, be able to think reflectively, be able to appreciate and to produce humor, and desire some variety.

The authors conclude the study stating:

Not all creative people have high levels of intelligence and they do not all exhibit each of these characteristics (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M15-10).

Seldom do we find one individual with all the components of creativity. That is why organizations exist. In the mix of an organization as persons and personalities are blended there can come, if allowed, a new creation, or transformation where new life is given to a dead or dormant body. Often in a marriage, family or organizational meeting people tend to get very frustrated with others who do not see it their way, who are, and who think different:

The adapters prefer structured situations and seek answers to the problem at hand and are perceived by innovators as being rigid. Innovators appreciate an unstructured environment and seek to answer questions that have not yet been asked and are perceived by adapters as being impractical and as risk takers. However, both are needed and research has found that both are capable of generating original creative solutions (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M15-10, 11).

It is important to include everyone in the mix. As people in an organization accept each other, listening to the ideas of others and sharing their own, there comes the birth of creative new ideas. The present clerk of Bangor Liberty Friends Church, Kent Johnson, was asked by a lay minister in the area how to bring renewal to the church he pastors and Kent wisely replied, "get everyone involved, church is not a spectator sport" (Kent Johnson, 1994). "A passive, uninvolved laity is a luxury that small, rural congregations cannot afford. The single most important factor in building a vital church is strong lay leadership" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 127, 183).

Shani and Lau present a case study from the thriving 3M company demonstrating what led to and allowed for the creation of the popular "Post-It" note

pad. It is submitted here as a modern parable. As it is read, see what conditions were present to allow the creation of something new and useful:

The attitude of management is crucial, If management is intolerant and destructively critical when mistakes are made, it kills initiative. In the creative environment of 3M managers and leaders show a turnover rate of less than 4 percent. Divisions are kept small. People are on a first name basis. As anyone comes up with a new idea he/she is allowed to form an action team by recruiting others from any department of the company. All members of the team are promoted and receive raises as the project develops. There is the 15 percent rule. Everyone is encouraged to spend up to 15 percent of their work week on anything they want to as long as it is product related. The climate for creativity is generated where playfulness is an important part.

Post-It notes started out as another oddball idea. An adhesive that didn't form a permanent bond was completely contrary to the typical applications that insist that the ultimate adhesive is one that forms an unbreakable bond. Spencer Silver who developed the adhesive credited it to one part meticulous calculation and one part fooling around. Too, for an organization whose lifeblood was in producing tape of all kinds, to even imagine producing anything that eliminated the need for applying tape to fasten something down was almost an unthinkable leap into a void. 'But it had to be good for something,' said Silver. 'Aren't their times when someone might want a glue to hold something for awhile but not forever?' He and his action team thought, 'could we produce a product that would hold tight as long as people need it to but then let go when people want it to.'

For over five years Silver worked on this idea, the organization never protested his research, they allowed him to fool around with his strange adhesive and he remained faithful to his other duties. The first Post-It adhesive was applied to develop a bulletin board that 3M did manufacture and sell but it was slow moving in a sleepy market niche. Silver knew that there had to be a better idea, 'this stuff is obviously unique,' he said.

The powerful 3M company and Silver were hopelessly trapped by their own metaphor until Geoff Nicholson, who was new to the company, and who knew nothing about adhesives started another action team. On his team was a chemist, Arthur Fry who directed the choir of his church. To find the songs on Sunday he would mark the places with little slips of paper. The little slips would inevitably fall out or get blown off and would flutter to the floor. In frustration he applied some of the adhesive to small pieces of paper to mark his

choir's hymn books! Fry invented the 'better bookmark' when he realized the application for the adhesive was not for a fixed surface, but on paper itself.

It took two more scientists to invent a paper coating that would allow the Post-It adhesive to work. This was necessary, because the glue, once applied, then stuck down, would stay on the paper and on the object it was stuck to when pulled off. It had no memory of where it should be. The special coating keeps the adhesive only on the paper, not allowing the Post-It to leave residue or tracks where they have been stuck, and allows the paper to be applied to all sorts of different surfaces over and over.

Then, the company engineers and machine operators said that it would be impossible to design machinery to manufacture the product.

The action team's records report the important attitude that allowed them to positively encounter impossibility:

'Problems are wonderful things to have!' Though the engineers could not figure out a way to mass produce a product and get it to market, Fry, a gaduteer himself assembled a machine in his own basement which could apply the adhesive to a paper roll. Then he couldn't get the machine out the basement door and finally bashed a hole through the basement wall. It took two more years to develop a set of unique proprietary machines that are the key to mass producing the Post-It notes with consistency and dependability (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M15-3 - M15-6).

Including everyone's ideas, giving them time, letting them play and recognizing their contributions to the company's success are all part of what allowed the creative mix to generate something new.

Few rural and small town organizations have the resources the 3M company has. So, it would be easy to sit and complain about the lack of resources that are available. Many rural groups get caught in that trap.

As we consider what we do and do not have to compose the creative mix, Mary A. Agria, rural development specialist for The Center for Theology and Land states:

"one beginning-point could be a resource assessment--while a community may not have certain assets, it is bound to have others. Start where you are with what you have" (Agria, 1995, p. 20).

In my research for this project, one of the pastors I interviewed from a thriving rural church is from the mid-west but wanted to remain anonymous. He reported, "about all I did here the first few years was have funerals." But, with the people in the church, they developed a very special ministry for dying families. Through the funerals they made contacts. People felt them so warm and caring that the news got out. New people started coming and their church started to turn around and grow. In some rural sites, maybe all one can perceive is death. The pastor and church mentioned above are finding death can be turned to life!

For most rural churches and communities, however, there will be several resources. Some resources are material and some resources are in the individuals and their talents. The people groups where they are, with the resources that are theirs, are the mix from which new life can generate.

## **MANAGING THE ORGANIZATIONAL MIX**

Making decisions and managing the creative mix that is ours is an intriguing opportunity to invent something new. Each day working together, involving others, giving it time, making mistakes, learning more and all with the expectancy there will be a new form take shape, or that we will see restoration and newness come to some old form. That is the exciting expectancy which engages all of us, whether lay person or pastor, involved in ministry.

That intriguing excitement is especially true for those of us in a rural setting. Urban churches are popping up all over, there is one for every flavor that can be imagined. In Urbana where people are making heavy financial commitments for



housing and having families, can spring all kinds of groups and churches. Here in rural areas, with the documented trends stated in chapter one, we have the exciting opportunity to put what we can together with hope and prayer and with lots of hard work, see new life spring forth! It is possible. It can happen. It is exciting to see and be a part of and it is a miracle!

To experience the miracle of new life in an organization requires managing the organizational mix and making creative decisions. Managing the mix and making creative decisions will take more than mere observation of that which is apparent. Making creative decisions, as well as using keen observation, requires perception, probing and sensing with care, all that which is not visible, but which is very **real**, below the surface of every organization.

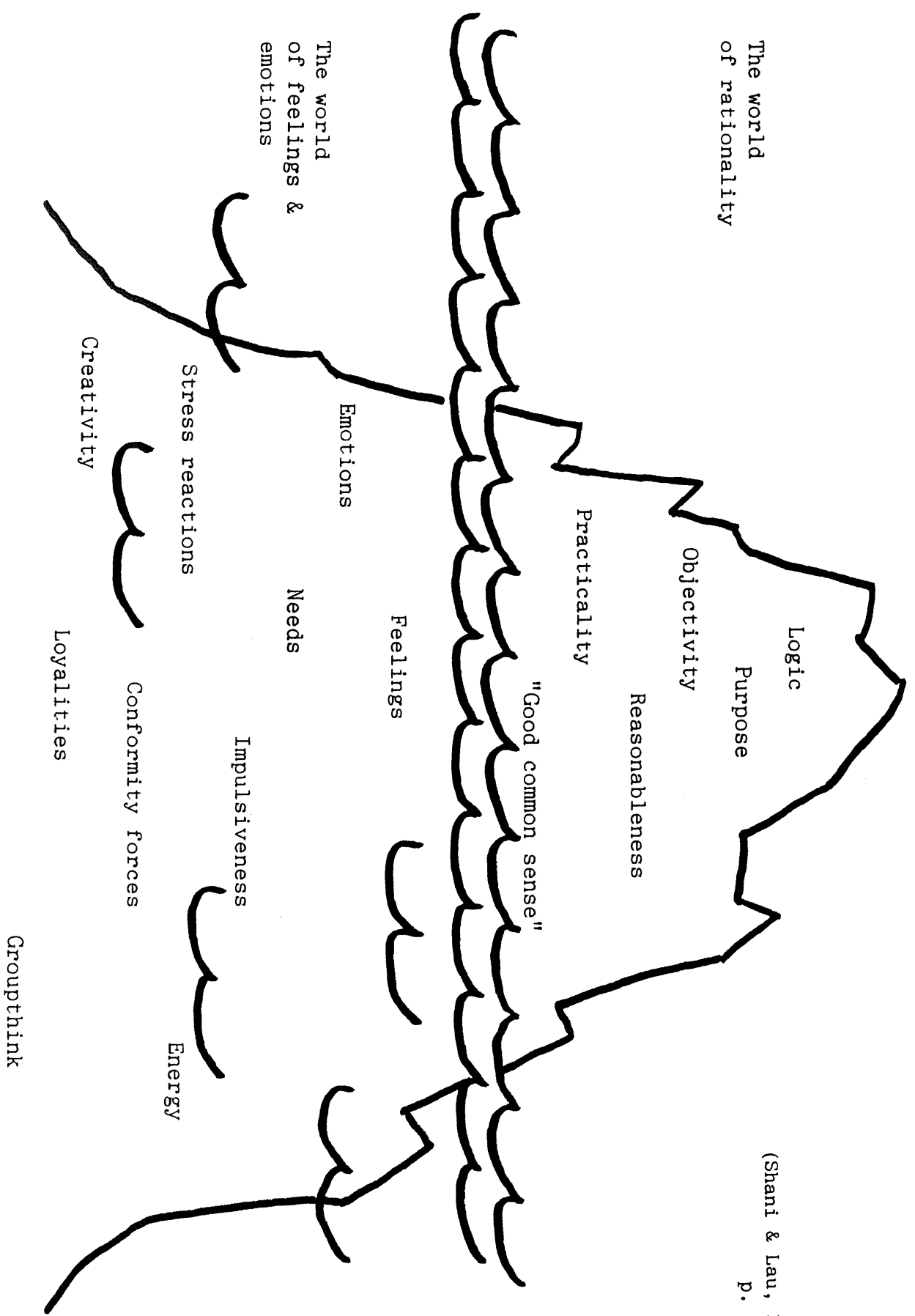
The next inset page shows how, "Rationality is just the tip of the iceberg. Below the water line are forces that are potent generators of behavior: emotions, feelings, needs, stress reactions, impulsiveness, energy, creativity forces, loyalties, and group think, just to mention a few" (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M1-9). If we do not give what lies below the surface due consideration then the course we plot will lead us to sure shipwreck.

To add a Sunday school wing might make a lot of sense. But it may not be if it comes at the expense of a wall lovingly replastered by a grandfather or a stained glass window donated in memory of a loved one two generations ago. To abandon a closing Amen might erase the living legacy of a great-Aunt who introduced that practice in the choir 30 years ago. While such changes are not without impact in urban churches, they may be particularly controversial in small, rural congregations (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 118).

Do not forget the oral recital of the story about the pastor that changed the clock in chapter three. Leaders who forget to consider these important, below the surface, formations may well end up on the next boat out.

The world  
of rationality

(Shani & Lau, 1996,  
p. M1-10)



The study of organizational behavior focuses heavily upon the feeling aspects of human action and interactions in order to understand why people do not always behave according to the rational model of organizations.

After being here at Bangor Liberty for a couple of years there was a Christian Education Meeting that decided the dates for our annual Christmas candle light service and our children's Christmas program. Everyone agreed and the dates were presented in the monthly business meeting, where, again, everyone agreed with no problem. Then, like dark thunderheads marching across the prairie from the west with lightning flashing, we had quite a storm! I was informed that in the merger of our two churches there were certain agreements that were made and were not being observed. One was that every year the programs would alternate between having the children's Christmas program on Christmas Eve and having the candle light program on Christmas Eve. We had, without knowing, planned the candle light program on Christmas Eve, which would make it the second year in a row!

The people from Liberty felt we were minimizing them and their history of always having the children's Christmas program on Christmas Eve. Further, we learned there were a number of pictures that had come from the Liberty Church which were supposed to be put up in the Bangor Church as they united and these pictures had not been cared for, were not up and some of them had disappeared. As I listened to the person orienting me, I began to sense deeper down below their frustration with the dates and the pictures was the real hurt that the families from Liberty had felt minimized and left out. Former ministers had not given them as much attention. They did not feel that they or their traditions were as important as the people and the traditions of the people from Bangor.

Scheduling the candle light program on Christmas Eve, two years in a row, was the "straw that broke the camels back," and initiated enough energy for the Liberty people to share the many ways they had felt minimized. It certainly was a surprise to me and a great help to have that information. We were able to look for and find the pictures, dust them off and put them up in places where they can be seen. They are

antique pictures that tell a Bible story as well as part of the story of the Liberty community. Grandparents point to the pictures and remember their important history as they share memories with the younger children.

With this valuable information, we were better able to plan our church calendar to reflect the history of our married church partnership. We were able to consider appointments to our various committees and endeavor to keep more of a balanced representation from both communities. As well, I was able to focus my visitation agenda a little more in the direction of the Liberty people to listen to them, to be able to better reflect their concerns in the wider ministry of the church and help them to feel included. As a result of those decisions we gained back some families that had quit attending our church previously. We also gained the involvement of some others who were just on the periphery.

Pastors, be careful, there are lots of unwritten rules! Past agreements and history are often not written down. This is especially true for rural and small town congregations. A new minister comes in and everyone enjoys the honeymoon. Without knowing it he/she will, without doubt, eventually do something contrary to past agreements and historical routine. People begin to feel frustrated at him/her and often in rural areas will not express it directly. He/she will continue on, either trying harder to do the same things or begin to shut down and do less, sensing, but not knowing why folks are frustrated.

Established church members, be kind and patient with your minister and with new people attending. Smile, take a deep breath. Remember your minister and those who are new have no way of knowing all the little things you take for granted. Pretend they are from a foreign country. They have no idea as to why you do things the way you do. Help them out. Patiently and with an encouraging smile,

explain why things are important. I'm glad that someone took the time to explain some of the Liberty history to me on that stormy afternoon. It has been very helpful.

Without realizing what is really happening in these situations, those unfamiliar to rural ministry or those new from college or seminary, often become defensive. The negative concern about a decision or program, if it does finally get expressed, will often seem petty if the minister is only observing what is on the surface. The minister may, in defensiveness, respond likewise in anger to what they feel is projected at him/her. A division can form which then separates the minister from the person(s) expressing the concern. In rural and small town areas where people all know each other and where they naturally defend each other, the minister may well, in time find him/herself on the outside looking in, emotionally. Many ministers have chosen to move and some have had to move over just such issues which escalated, became personal and were blown out of proportion. Under the surface of what seemed so simple and smooth were all kinds of feelings, past agreements and traditions they had hit in their hurry to get the ship to a certain destination.

For ministers from urban backgrounds and fresh college/seminary graduates who have been trained in fine programs but which have not had any or little rural orientation, there are some cautions:

- 1) Bottom line, corporate values are hard to accept and take charge approaches will meet with a cold reception in most rural churches. Charge ahead change agents and innovators are going to severely limit their effectiveness. Remember, regardless of how long your tenure proves to be in a given church, that longevity pales compared to the multigenerational experiences of many family members within a particular community. You will always be a newcomer and will not have the same clout as a community matriarch or patriarch.

- 2) The best ideas somehow percolate up from the collective experience of parishioners.

3) Long-time matriarchs and patriarchs of a congregation will not make it easy for pastors to sort out important expectations (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 122, 123).

Experienced managers of thriving rural and small town organizations operate on the same level as the people, listening to them. In the daily conversations ideas are shared back and forth. Questions can be asked. They know it is very unwise to present a new idea in any group without doing the proper preparatory work. They bounce the idea off of different people, asking for their input and listening very closely. Often, as they are patient, their ideas will resurface, in the words of another person in some committee meeting. Ah, but the wise manager will hold their frustration and keep from saying, "That's what I've been trying to suggest to you folks..." No, the experienced manager of a thriving organization will smile, and thank God in their inner person and participate in watching a miracle! Imagine the courage it takes for an established person in the group to suggest something new or different! "Those with experience revitalizing rural communities are quick to give credit to others" (Schultz, 1990, p. 5).

"Rural clergy who have succeeded in helping their congregations make what could be construed as wrenching transitions commonly report that direct power plays are among the least effective means of empowering change" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 184). In their section on "People and Power in the Rural Community," Agria and Jung assert:

Goal oriented leadership often will not work. Emphasize process instead of goals. Goal orientation is urbanized. When we as ministers quit imposing our goals on the congregation and the council we will have less anxiety, more energy, more enjoyment of the people, an increase in the ability to preach good news rather than the law, less disappointment and anger and fewer instances of taking things personally (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 161).

To manage the mix and make good decisions, based not only on observation but, as well, on perception of what is below the surface, it is necessary to:

Gather the history of a congregation. Ask questions and **listen**. It is through listening that one comes to know the story and the storyteller. Ask about the founding fathers and mothers and their descendants; ask about the congregational history; ask how the congregation gets things done; ask about the congregational church year; ask about wedding, birth/baby dedications, baptismal, communion and funeral traditions; ask about how the area or town there was populated and what significant events have happened there (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 151-153).

In Schaller's 30-year research of the rural church with contributing authors, Hassinger, Holik and Benson, it was discovered that "30 percent of the ministers spent less than one hour per week on administration and that administration was the activity on which the highest proportion of ministers would prefer to spend less time." Furthermore, his study shows that, generally, "rural ministers are weak in the area of program development" (Schaller, 1988, p. 122, 123, 161). If church ministers and community leaders are to consider everything above and "below the water line," and involve others in that important process, then more time must be given to creative, people-participative administration. And, as asserted in chapter three on networking and visitation, it is certain that creative decision making and administration can **NOT** happen unless one is *dwelling* with the people and listening well to them.

## STRUCTURING A CREATIVE ORGANIZATION

Along with the earlier discussion on the importance of flexibility, in chapter three, Shani & Lau add that structure and flow charts of thriving organizations today

are not vertical but, "horizontal and flexible." They maintain the need for:

Greater horizontal and cross-unit coordination and integration within organizations of all types. Simply put, lateral organization capability means that people get things done by working across organizational units rather than relying on the managerial hierarchy. The organization is decentralized with free flow of information (p. M13-11).

"Congregations and pastors need to establish the goal of a mutual ministry, rather than a top-down model, positioning each other to bolster one another as they work toward a common vision. This designs a ministry that is a mutual process, draws out grace, allows forgiveness, permits intimacy and allows risk taking" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 123).

A more "horizontal," organization, being flexible and open to spontaneity, will often run ahead of its ability to plan in detail for its program. This is very frightening for most and is one reason that many organizations, secular and sacred, choose to stay in their familiar routine, merely surviving and getting by which leads to sure and eventual stagnation.

Horizontally organized and flexible organizations will be much more free flowing, less patterned and more creative. W. A. Pasmore, describes the emergent sociotechnical system that is creative in his book, Designing Effective Organizations, and quoted by Shani & Lau:

The most exciting development to emerge in the physical sciences is the discovery of the fractal, which is a basic building block of complex and chaotic-appearing systems. In brief, fractals are repetitive images that appear when computers run programs based on nonlinear equations; order in chaos.

Individuals vary in qualities and characteristics, but do fit into the larger structure of the organization. With the entire range of diversity in the system they come together when facing problems and a pattern will emerge.



The Japanese organizations have learned that it is valuable to have employee mobility across organizational functions. The more flexible individuals are, the more flexible the overall organization can be.

The fractal organization in contrast to others has similar patterns at the top and bottom of the organization. The fractal organization does not have a specific organizational chart and its design offers flexibility for everyone in the design (p. 13-19, 20).

For secular and sacred organizations which are traditionally and formally structured from the top down, it will be almost impossible to adopt a more "horizontal" structure unless those at the top allow people to participate actively in change. Still, in research reported in The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, there is evidence to support that they, too, can be dynamic and creative. Top down organizations can "stimulate social and religious change. But this creative attitude must be stimulated from the top hierarchy down to the roles of priests, sisters, ministers and lay workers to the grassroots level" (Adriance, 1991, p. 292). This documentation has its correlation in the secular business world. Research in the graduate course entitled, "Organization Structure, Behavior and Design," taught by Gary L. Frank at Drake University in the fall of 1995, emphasizes this same truth. Top down organizations may give their middle managers and employees seminars on creativity, efficiency, etc., but unless they, too, participate and give them permission and viable opportunity to change and initiate new and creative patterns and programs, they can spend their time and money, but the organization will not become more productive in the long term. Only as those at the very top are willing to listen, share information openly, learn, grow and develop and give permission and opportunity for the same to everyone in the organization, will the organization become more creative and productive. Otherwise those in lower management or those on the level of the workers, after developing new ideas generated in a seminar

or after brain storming about better efficiency, will come back to the same organization and will not be able to initiate viable, long-term change, unless those at the top are willing to participate and change with them.

The same application can be made to denominations, districts/yearly meetings, to churches and to any organization, be it Boy Scouts, Kiwanis or whatever.

Many denominations and businesses are guilty of providing seminars and conferences to fire up the pastors and leaders ("middle management") and then send them back, expecting them to work wonders, to be disappointed and seldom see real change or growth. Viable change and growth can only come as the denomination, including those at the top, participate in it and change the systems structures to allow for it.

Schaller observed in his 30-year study of the rural church that which is observable all over. Generally, community-oriented churches are thriving and main stream denominational churches are struggling. The denominational churches which are growing, as a general rule, have distinguished themselves in some significant ways and are different from the norm of their denomination.

Those which are thriving are doing so because they are putting people before their denominational program and are meeting people's needs in a caring way that is not the norm for their denomination. As they do this, some individual denominational churches are making conscious choices to become more of a community church. These choices come with a lot of agony to some who put program before people, form before flexibility.

The largest church in Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends sits on a gravel road several miles outside of town. Thirty years ago they were wasting away but made a conscious decision to change. They became a community church and made that change public to the community and to the denomination. In a denomination which

has not traditionally practiced baptism or communion with the elements they are and make no bones about it. They have made other conscious choices. They have guitars, trumpets and drums thumping out rhythmic songs. They have a hopping youth program. They did not just make these changes for the sake of change. They made these choices, however, to meet the needs of the people in their area as they began to minister and involve others rather than just repeating the ritual of their tradition.

This growth pattern has been established for over 20 years. They have built a new church and have a growing staff with very low turn over. The current pastor has been there approximately 15 years.

It is interesting to hear people talk of this church in denominational meetings. Often frustration is expressed. Why? Instead of rolling over and dying, as it surely was, it is now thriving. Why can't the denomination be glad and celebrate with the people of this church? Why did the church isolate itself from the denomination? Was that completely necessary?

Instead of holding tightly to a constrictive structure, or instead of tossing that structure completely away for a new one, there are other options. As in every discussion, whether in marriage or in any group of people, the easiest thing to do is to join one side or the other and argue. "I/we are right and you/they are wrong." We do this because it is easiest and it keeps us from having to get down to the hard work of listening and looking for other options. **There are always more options!** For the Friends at Bangor Liberty, Wilbur pointed the way when the church was tested by the baptism/communion, community church issue. Though there has been heightened tension for those in the church and those in the denomination, strong ties remain between the church and denomination and the needs of new people are being met.

## "COMMUNICATION DIALOGUING"

The difficulty is in developing a structural organization which allows the discovery of creative options. As stated previously, a creative organization does not, necessarily, have any fixed pattern or flow chart. However there are some common traits of creative organizations, chief of which is open, free flowing communication.

To manage the mix, to make thriving choices in the heartland and to develop creative organizations requires:

**Communication dialoguing** which overcomes diversity and contradictory expectations by bringing similarities and differences in perspective out into the open. Such exchange is the foundation for understanding, trust, and, thus effective relations. Successful organizations use this exchange. Recent research indicates that organizational problems can be traced to expectation discrepancies. Interpersonal dialoguing is a managerial tool to bridge the discrepancy gap (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M2-4, 5).

For "communication dialoguing" to be possible, it is necessary to come to the same level as the person(s) one wants to hear and share with. That is what Jesus did and does for us in *dwelling* with us. Many leaders "choose not to lead but to 'boss;' they view their group members as inferior, undisciplined, untrainable and requiring their 'management'" (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M3-6). This prevents creative reciprocal dialogue from happening and stagnates the free creative flow.

The free flow of information and "communication dialoguing" in an organization naturally leads to more creative "brain storming," or "group synergy." One evening in our class at Drake University on, Organization Structure, Behavior, and Design, taught by professor, Gary L. Frank, we did an experiment with "group synergy." We were each given a sheet of paper filled with partial phrases and we had to try to guess the rest of the phrase for each line. The phrases were random, had no apparent order and were completely meaningless. We were to work for a set number

of minutes all alone without talking to anyone. I could only get three or four of them and was frustrated, it seemed an impossible task. The other frustrated voices and groans joined mine as the class's tension raised. After the allotted amount of time, no one had been able to figure out the completion of more than just a few phrases.

Professor Frank smiled, then gave us permission to get into groups and work on them. We were given another time limit. We began to read them to each other and to share ideas aloud. One person thought of an idea that led to another idea by someone else and in no time we were throwing out ideas and exchanging them like bids are exchanged on Wall Street. We grinned, laughed and before the time was up we had all the phrases completed, each making perfect sense. "You have just experienced 'group synergy,'" said Professor Frank. "Synergistic" group activity is enlightening as the spark of creativity is fanned by openness and spontaneous sharing.

For "group synergy" to work there must be permission for a group to function freely; there must be free flow of information, listening to everyone and sharing back any idea that comes popping into your head or heart; and there must be time given for it to happen.

When first starting to share, some of us thought our ideas were unimportant. We said them almost in a whisper, embarrassed. Sometimes the things one person would say sounded completely crazy, then all the sudden their crazy idea would lead you to another thought that did connect. I remember holding back one idea, "no, it couldn't have anything to do with the phrase," I said to myself, it was so idiotic. Our group was stuck, it was the last phrase, the time was ticking and we wanted to be the first group finished. I finally blurted out what I had been thinking, one lady looked at me and started to say, "that has nothing to do with...," she stopped in mid sentence, my thought had hooked on to something else in her, she shared it and we had the

answer! It was absolutely crazy; a little scary, having to be vulnerable; it was fun, we laughed until some of us had tears; and it works. "Group synergy" is a creative energy which discovers solutions to puzzling problems.

Now, as believers in a living Lord, let's add the dynamic of prayer, the movement of the Holy Spirit and imagine what "group synergy" could do in our churches and committee meetings, even if it was allowed just once in a while.

Some of the reasons we do not experience the creativity of "communication dialoguing" and "group synergy," more are: 1) It is difficult to admit there are many other good ideas out there besides our own; 2) It is difficult to admit a need for help; 3) It is difficult to be vulnerable and share the small piece of the puzzle which comes to us which looks and sounds out of place, even idiotic; 4) It seems a little irreverent to those of us from a fundamental church background, because it takes loosening up smiling, joking and a playful attitude; 5) It takes time; 6) It takes someone to give us permission to do this, and the most important; 7) It takes active exchange on the same level with and listening to others.

One evening in the fall, a typical Christian Education Committee meeting in Bangor Liberty Friends was convened by four mothers, very tired from their active day. After a few preliminaries one of them mentioned an on going problem. Those participating in the adult Sunday school classes had become stuck in a rut. Though well committed, the same ones attended; the same ones who always talk, talked; the same ones who were always silent, stayed silent; the younger people had their class, the older people had their class, neither of which associated much; and there were few new people coming in.

Suddenly one of the mothers, joking said, "let's have a fruit basket upset!" There was silence, the others begin to smile and soon they were each "synergised" and brainstorming. Ideas snapped like popcorn out of sizzling oil. When they were done

they had developed the idea of the, "Sunday School Scramble." Each Sunday for the month of January, when attendance is lowest following the holidays, they planned to scramble the adult Sunday school classes. The four ladies were able to get the whole church to own the idea through the monthly business meeting as well as challenging the "feet-draggers" and the "hand-wringers" to, "just try it for one month, it will be fun!"

They prepared a basket with slips of paper. Each paper had the name of one of the three preselected teachers who had agreed to work with them. As people came in the door of the church in January they were greeted with a smile, a reminder about "Sunday School Scramble" and offered the basket that was held out to them. They picked a folded slip of paper, opened it and went to that class. If spouses received the same teacher one of them had to choose again until they had a different teacher. Those who typically group together were automatically in a different group. The younger were mixed with the older and people learned much more about others as they shared and prayed together. During the "Sunday School Scramble," the usual sub-zero, slow January attendance was boosted to an all time record of 126!

Thriving programs are, "built around participants' own experiences" (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M2-9). "Communication Dialoguing" helps to build consensus and involves others in creative synergistic experiences that can bring new life to any group.

## **SABOTAGING AN ORGANIZATION**

A creative, thriving organization requires constant maintenance. The same key attitudes, structuring and activity described in the previous pages to initiate a creative organization are important to keep it going. Letting down on the open flow

of dialogue, insisting on a top down structure, etc. will sabotage our own organization. In our church governmental process we often, in the words of Frances Martin, "shoot ourself in the foot."

History and experience teach us, few organizations are destroyed by outside forces but most crumble from within. Just because an organization starts to do well does not mean it will continue to do well unless those involved intentionally continue to keep the spark of synergistic creativity alive.

A small town church in the heartland had good balanced growth for several years and added on substantially to its building. As they grew the people of the church wanted to boost their growing youth program in the community by hiring additional staff. The pastor who had guided them through the growth period just could not share the reins with anyone. He felt threatened that he was not doing a sufficient job at the mere suggestion of hiring someone else. From that point they began to spiral down. Some families left to attend other area churches that had a vital youth program. The pastor finally left the church and the denomination, somewhat disgraced, after many years of faithful service, basically because he would not budge and felt that he needed to control everything. The snowball that was growing could have kept increasing, but instead began to decline.

It is not just the pastor who can sabotage an organization. A pastor can not bring consistent, healthy growth to a church over the long term alone, neither can he/she bring on a decline alone.

Along with the rituals we dress and redress, Ruffcorn lists some that sabotage a church or community organization and keep it from thriving:

Our recital of dead end questions that we ritualize does not lead to open the way to a solution or to an understanding. These dead end questions bog us down in despair, they are questions with no answers, yet, we recite them over and over to avoid wrestling with



different questions that would help us to work through to new understandings and to open solutions. The recital of these ritualized dead end questions allows us to feel dedicated and devoted without ever having to change. Some examples of our dearly held dead end questions are: 'What's wrong with those people/that person?' 'What have I done to deserve such a church/pastor/committee/etc.?' 'Why do they let this happen'...and there are many, many more dead end questions.

What we need are constructive questions that help to plot personal development and a course to take, such as: 1) 'What could be good about this?' 2) 'What is not quite right, yet, and needs attention, work and prayer?' 3) 'What am I willing to do to make it the way I want it?' 4) 'What am I willing to STOP doing to make it the way I want it?' 5) 'How can I do what's necessary to get the job done and ENJOY it?' 6) 'Have I prematurely given up on any one person, group, organization or activity?' 7) 'Am I able to do something different and try again?' (Ruffcorn, 1994, p. 104-109).

We choose which questions we will ask ourself and which ones we will repeat in our groups. Our choice will make the difference between sabotaging our own group or in having a "synergistic," enlivening experience.

The good news from the research presented in this chapter is any one of us can be creative. Any organization, any committee and any church, no matter how small or strapped for resources, can be creative and in the Spirit of the Word, can be "synergistic!"

## CHAPTER SIX

### DEVELOPING AN INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY IN THE HEARTLAND

A thriving rural church and community is one where a network is formed which includes people of all ages. Society in rural communities is aging. The churches and community organizations reflect this graying trend. If they choose to, however, rural churches and organizations can draw in and involve younger people. It is possible to form a more intergenerational mix through organizations which already exist and through developing new programs.

An intergenerational network that includes people of all ages is formed by investing energy and targeting caring, responsive efforts toward a certain need.

#### INVESTING ENERGY FOR AN INTERGENERATIONAL GROUP

Agria and Jung in their handy resource, Ministering in Rural Communities, describe the investment of energy required to draw in and involve all ages, "rural and small town churches need to encourage a far more active laity than do their counterparts in urban settings" (1994, p. 126). In other words, to keep from dying, to involve others, to draw in younger people and to draw in new people rural churches and communities have to work together and have to be, "**more active!**"

It is possible to have a thriving intergenerational rural church and community in a depopulating, dying area, but it will take being "**more active.**" To turn a down trend around requires three times the energy and activity. To turn a down trend around requires three times the visitation and community contacts. To turn a down

trend around requires three times the energy in a local Kiwanis group, for example, to organize pony rides in a parade to attract and involve the children.

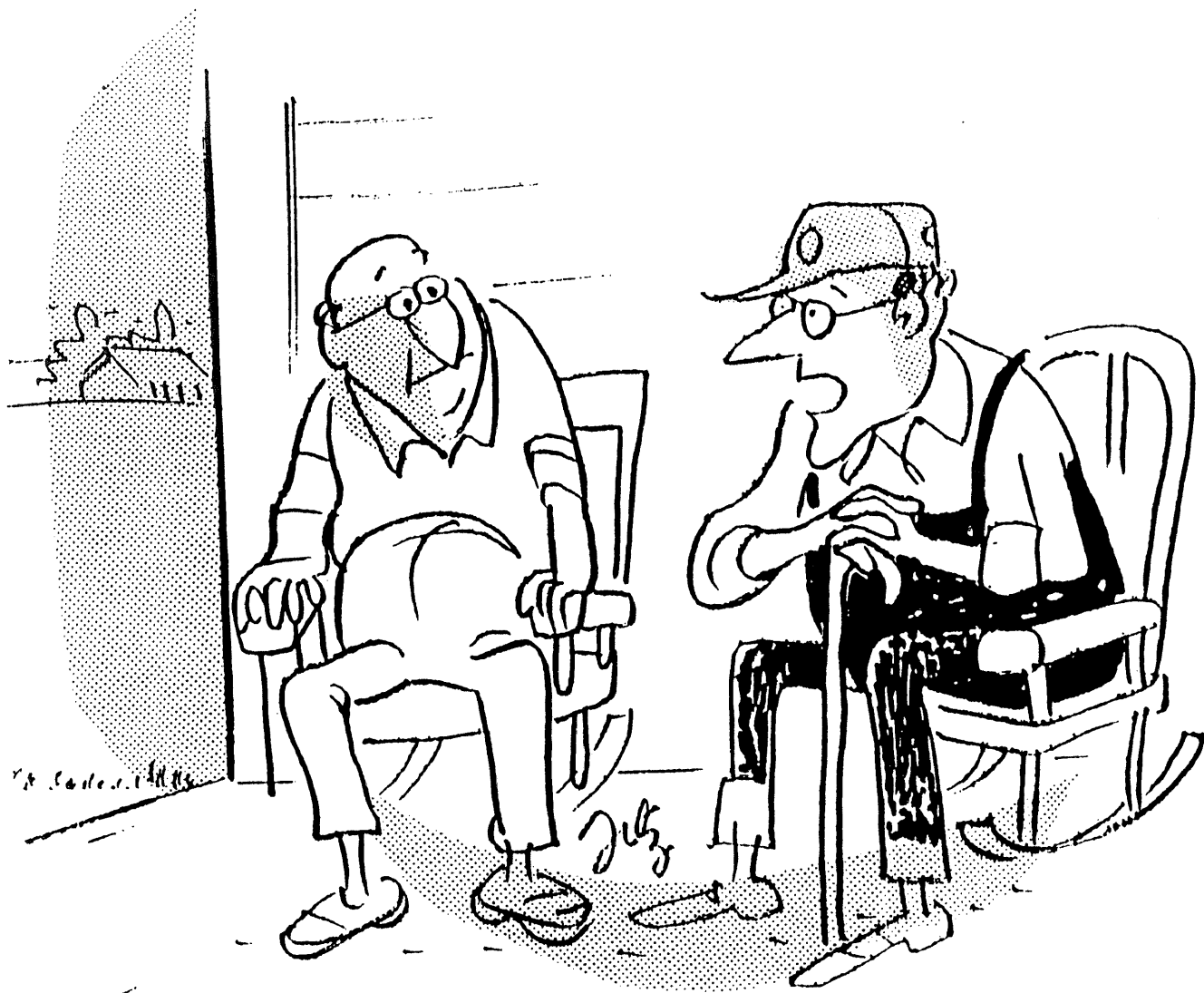
"Church growth takes hard work and in a rural area it takes real hard work, but it can be done! Rural church growth can not, necessarily, be done by the educated or degreed, but by those who have a burning love for our Lord and a yearning to share that love with others" (Exman, 1987, p. 54).

Personally, I visualize a salmon swimming up stream to spawn. It takes tremendous effort to get from one level to another, but it can be done. Watching salmon fight their way up stream in the northwest is very interesting. After jumping their way up one level they rest to one side, circle easily for a while, then they muster everything they have, moving in perfect timing and with a mighty thrust they launch themselves to the next level, where they again rest.

Physically and spiritually it is natural to spawn. There is too much beauty in our rural life style to let it die. There is too much at stake to not make the investment of energy required to bring new life.

Following the cycles of the church and community calendar, a group can catch a rhythm, timing their investment of energy to reach stages where new life can be spawned. If the expenditure of that much energy sounds like something impossible, or only possible for the young, then one is sadly mistaken. As will be shown in the living examples to follow, it is not just young people's investment of energy which make intergenerational groups possible.

"Ernest Burgess, a pioneer in the sociology of aging, asserts, 'the retired man and his wife are imprisoned in a roleless role. They have no vital function to perform.' This gives rise to role loss" (Reynolds, 1985, p. 3). There are many older church and community members who are not content, however, with a "roleless role". In thriving churches and communities older members are reinvesting energy,



**Want to tag along with me to town tonight for a  
future farmers meeting?**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

in many cases, working without any younger folk, to enliven their church and community. As people of any age invest themselves and their energy to enliven their community they will find they, too, personally will be enlivened.

### **TARGETING EFFORTS TOWARD AN INTERGENERATIONAL GROUP**

Any group can grow if it decides to. Any group can grow as it actively listens to the needs of those in the community and responds in caring ways to minister to those needs. "As we listen to the voices of men and women, the old and the young, in a rural area we will see some common concerns" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 217).

Again we cite the example of the rural church pastored by a friend and a Friend who only preformed funerals for several years. They are growing just because they have decided to minister in very caring ways during a death and a funeral and with consistency do just that. As growth has come, their ministry is enlarging as well. They are now forming a senior citizen's group, and Bible study/share groups for widows. Though this ministry is mainly focused on an older generation it is, quite naturally, bringing in and including those who are younger into the church. Most of the older people ministered to have children and grandchildren. As the faith network of the church grows, it gradually includes these younger generations.

A healthy church and thriving community does not need to focus its energy, necessarily, toward a younger generation to obtain their participation. As it discovers a need by listening and focuses caring, consistent ministry toward that need, growth will occur and younger people will naturally become more involved over a period of time.

Rural America is generally comprised of a graying generation. "The typical rural church is weighted with older members and has a majority of female members.

One half or more of the members are 65 years of age or older and women outnumbered men in almost two-thirds of the congregations" (Schaller, 1988, p. 57).

Often the older folk talk about the need to have younger people participating so their group or church does not cease to exist. Interesting research indicates there are churches in rural areas which no longer have children in regular attendance, yet, which continue to have a time in their worship hour for a children's message. They ritualize this sacred time, "in symbolic importance of the children's presence" (Terry, 1990, p. 165), even though the children are not there.

In one rural church I visited while researching this project I saw just that. There were about fifteen of us in attendance and there were no children. Still, just as if children were present, they announced, "now it is time for the children's message." After the service I complimented the lady who did the illustration. She commented, "even though we haven't had any children for a long time we just can not give up having our children's message." Just how does an older group get past the aching desire to have younger people involved and go about attracting and holding the younger generation?

With the strong desire to attract children and youth, churches often get the cart before the horse. "Some congregations make the mistake of investing a great deal of energy primarily in children's ministries and or in a youth group with the hope that they will grow. Youth are not the future!" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 183). Putting children and or youth first will burn out those trying to do it. It is necessary to have a good solid base of older and younger adults to have viable consistency for children's and youth programs. It takes a group with sufficient fiscal and physical reserve to maintain children's and youth ministry. Someone has to pay the bills!

In the 1970's Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends invested in a church planting operation in a rural area south of Muscatine in Louisa County. There was a dedicated

group who built a building and began to bus in children and youth from trailer courts and housing additions from several miles around. Very quickly they had a Sunday School of well over a hundred and a very active youth group. After two years of courageous investment this older and rural group ran out of money and energy. The pastor burnt out and had an emotional break down.

To save the church planting operation, a new pastoral couple was sent in by the yearly meeting. Over time they were able to build a valid, consistent ministry that began to grow again. The bus stayed parked behind the church and no money was spent on it, or on just bringing children and youth to church. Instead, young couples were targeted in visitation and ministry. Eventually there were children and youth again, but they were connected to family units that formed a framework of a growing intergenerational group.

There are rural churches that have used bussing to build their church successfully. Successful bussing programs, however, have to be accompanied with an on going, exerted effort to make viable contacts with and directly involve the parents and families of the children and youth that are being brought in, otherwise, they are headed for sure burn out!

Research documents the low reserves of energy and resource in rural areas. "There are church and community economic health and time constraints that leave family members exhausted and isolated from one another" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 217). Because funds and energy are in short supply in rural areas, to be able to build an intergenerational group, a church or a community needs to carefully and specifically target some area of need they can address. As they minister consistently to that need, growth will happen. That growth in time will bring in a more varied people and program.

Bangor Liberty Friends suffered through the rural farm crisis of the 1980's followed by a pastoral, interpersonal, church conflict that hurt the congregation. Attendance dropped and the famed youth group that had been so active in the 1970's was history. As the church analyzed its situation, one of the many goals set was to build the youth group back. How was that to be accomplished? Where do you start to rebuild a youth group?

To eventually build back a viable intergenerational group the Ministry and Council of Bangor Liberty Friends started by keeping record of attendance in worship and by actively contacting and visiting those who failed to attend after two absences. Later, prospective families and young couples were targeted in both visitation and ministry. It has taken 10 years, but now there are children and youth of all ages in the church. Before these goals were achieved, the church still did not have the desired youth group and some of the elders and others wanted the pastor and spouse to personally invest in starting and maintaining one.

That would have short circuited the program. Instead, the church was able to last out the tension which built until finally, from the people, there arose very good youth leaders. This way a higher investment of time from the pastor and spouse continued toward nurturing prospective families and young couples.

Pastors who are "enablers" will not last out the tension and will make the mistake of starting and doing the children's ministry and, or youth work. I have made this mistake in the past. Later, what happens when the pastor leaves? The obvious, the group will falter and in most cases die.

Once prospective families and young couples are brought and knitted into a congregation or group and are encouraged to network, their group, naturally, will



snowball. As fellowships for them and with them are organized; as they have fun together in faith; as an environment where they feel positive support and safety is nurtured, they will have children!

Some have quipped about the growth at Bangor Liberty Friends saying, "when they put in the rural water system we started having lots of babies!"

To specifically target prospective families and young couples for visitation and ministry is not as easy as it sounds. Rural churches and community organizations give a lot of lip service, repeating their desire to have new and younger people participate. Then, as we have observed in former sections, after they repeat these ritualized phrases, to make themselves feel better, they then go home and do nothing significantly different to change.

Bangor Liberty Friends is reaping the fruit from a focused caring ministry to prospective families and to younger couples. In a depopulating area, on a regular basis, there are new families and young couples visiting the worship that someone has invited and helped to attend. In the first quarter of 1996, there have been four new families come to visit several times. Four new, young families visiting in three months is nothing astounding for an urban or city church. In a rural setting, however, four new families visiting in that amount of time represents **tremendous effort** and generates **hope!** Two of the families are making a commitment to the church. In each case, these families were encouraged by other established members of the church to come. When the pastor went to visit them, they each had already been visited by other active persons in the church.

One of the visiting families has come because they are struggling financially, and they have become part of the "SHARE Iowa Program," mentioned in chapter four.



**I don't know why you farmers must always over produce!**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

One of the new families started to come because established members helped them to find housing in a near by town. They helped the new family, watching their children, when they went to do business in town and could not get back to the child care center in time to pick them up before it closed. They helped when the new family needed a ride because their van was being worked on.

Specifically targeting certain needs and certain people will, eventually, bring in other people who will include a broader, intergenerational range than the initial target group. Though not necessarily targeted, in the last two years, Bangor Liberty Friends has brought in more than 10 older members into its faith family. Five of those are retired and two of them are single. Target a need, meet it and more people than you envision, initially, will be drawn in.

When I was younger I used to like to hunt a great deal. There were some places where the ducks would literally cloud the sky at pre-dawn. I told my brother about just such a site I had found and took him with me early one morning. We crept up and laid in the tall grass beside the water. As the first sun rays edged over the horizon the ducks started to stir and move. My brother became wide eyed, looking at me in astonishment. I smiled back, knowing that he was just as surprised as I had been the previous day when I had found this place. We had to be completely quiet, but according to our prior plan, on signal, we both stood and began to fire at the startled ducks as they rose in the air and filled the sky.

I picked four good targets as I fired and pumped the shot gun, felling each. My brother finished firing and I went quickly to recover the main course of a savory dinner our family would soon share. Wading in the water, retrieving the floating ducks, I noticed my brother still standing in frustration. "Where are yours?" I hollered. "I can't believe it, I didn't hit one!" he shouted in anger. Coming back to him, birds in hand, I said, "how could you miss?" He, raised his arm in unbelief

saying, "there were so many, I thought all I had to do was start shooting and I'd hit something!" He had emptied his gun, shooting at the huge flock of ducks and in so doing had not hit a one.

On the other hand, in similar situations, I have brought down more birds than what I had targeted with each shot. Specific targeting is necessary to be able to gather a growing, intergenerational congregation to celebrate around the table of our Lord's communion.

As rural churches and community groups we often make the same error, wasting our ammunition and time, becoming very frustrated as my brother did. We throw our hopeful words to the wide open sky: "We need younger people to get involved." "We wish the youth would come." "It would be great to have some children and get our Sunday school going again." Until we target specific new and younger persons and families, however, and make an effort to bring them in, things will continue on unchanged.

### **LIVING, INTERGENERATIONAL EXAMPLES OF INVESTED ENERGY AND TARGETING EFFORTS**

New life is being born in the State Center Methodist Church, which is in a small town, smack in the center of the heartland. In one of my interviews for this project in the spring of 1996, I had a conversation with a member from that church who has a new vision. She is retired but is reinvesting herself for her church and community. She organizes tours in our area for senior citizens as a part-time hobby/ministry which she is finding very enjoyable and which older people appreciate a great deal. As well, she has had a long-time concern that children and youth were becoming non-existent in her church.

"The easiest thing to do was complain about it," she said. "But as I prayed about it and began to visit with others, listening to them, I discovered neither the children, nor did the young parents like getting up early on Sunday to come to Sunday School." So, praying and brain storming with others, she organized Bible classes for the children that meet just a short time on week days after school. The classes are growing because they meet several needs: The need of the children in the church to be actively learning from the Word; the need of working parents who were concerned about their children having so much free, unmonitored time after school before they would get home; and the need of the church to become intergenerational and viable again. "The week day Bible classes for children are bringing new people and hope back to the church," she said with a spry twinkle in her eye. Investing yourself, meeting specific needs, to keep your church and community alive, is enlivening.

According to research, many rural churches and communities are sparking new life by initiating health care ministries to rural, isolated people. One of the important rural needs checked as important to address in Agria & Jung's significant rural ministry manual is, "getting medical assistance for rural people" (1994, p. 53).

Another living example of a person who is reinvesting herself to enlivening her church and community is found in Mrs. Sterk-Burnmeister, who at the age of 70 is helping to meet rural health care needs:

Sterk-Burnmeister, a 70-year-old retired nurse, spends up to 20 hours a week ministering to her brothers and sisters in Lost Nation, Iowa, a rural community of 700. She is what's known as a parish health minister.

'It is not good enough to just speak out in church,' said Sterk-Burnmeister, 'you have to bring that message into the home. You have to practice what you preach.'

To do that, she and her church joined the rural health care network initiated by the Mercy Health Center of Dubuque which has

started the Parish Health Ministry. This ministry's focus is to foster wellness.

'Wellness,' Sterk-Burnmeister said, 'means showing the love of God by working to promote the overall health of church members--physical, spiritual, emotional, social, intellectual and occupational.'

Sterk-Burnmeister may pick up the phone and gently remind someone to take her medication; she might give someone a ride to their doctor's appointment; she might make sure a stubborn elderly man does what the doctor says; she does cholesterol screening and blood-pressure checks.

Sterk-Burnmeister is the wellness advocate, educator, listener and friend in her church and community. She commutes bimonthly to Mercy for continuing-education programs where she is updated on the latest in medical applications of science and chaplaincy skills.

She does not draw blood or administer other invasive procedures, but acts as a bridge in the medical gap that leaves an increasing number of rural folk without health care (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 221).

Sterk-Burnmeister and her rural church are just one example of a growing number of those who are establishing wellness programs to help the people in their area network and sense hope. In north eastern Iowa, "there are 28 churches that participate in the tri-states, Parish Health Ministry. That number continues to grow by four churches a year" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 222). The Sacred Heart Church that Sterk-Burnmeister goes to and ministers out of is reversing a dying trend, becoming more healthy and is finding new life because of the church's investment of energy and focus of ministry in the needy area of rural health care. Though wellness ministries in rural areas naturally service more of an elderly population, the research demonstrates, as in the case of Sterk-Burnmeister's church, the ministry effort generates new life, intergenerationally, for the church as well.

Research from Schallers 30-year study shows the importance of having a good Sunday school program to have a thriving rural church. Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools are very important to keep a church alive and to keep people

participating intergenerationally in community. Bangor Liberty Friends has several people who have dedicated themselves, their time and energy to help organize and to teach in an active Sunday school program. That energy and targeting effort has helped to bring new life and new people into the church. We regularly get inquiry from people asking if we have Sunday school all year and if we still have vacation Bible school. Many rural churches have dropped these vital programs. Parents and grandparents who belong to the most responsive groups, that were observed in chapter four as potential people to be drawn into a church, are interested in these programs.

Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools help to instill the Word in a group and enliven all those who participate. Besides the spiritual knowledge and nurture they provide they socially keep younger and older people mixing and in touch with each other.

Children need to be in touch with older people and older people need to be in touch with children. We each need a variety of people in our support net to be enriched and to feel whole.

For example, one couple who struggle along every year in their farming operation find a deeper satisfaction helping to teach in the Sunday school of Bangor Liberty Friends. Despite losing a child of their own, Will and Jo Macy have not become isolated but have dedicated each week, faithfully, to prepare, to come early and to be in touch with the small children of their class. They teach them the Scripture on the children's level. To teach, they themselves have to be reading, studying and preparing. In this way they, too, are developing more in the Word. In addition, they fill a very necessary mentoring role for the children in our community.

One Sunday morning Will noticed one of their first grade boys was not entering the discussion or doing his activity as usual. Will asked him, "what's

wrong?" and the boy began to cry. Will took him outside the classroom, sat down with the boy on his lap and asked him what was bothering him. The boy told Will the other kids in school were making fun of him, bothering him and he did not want to go to school any more. Will listened and encouraged the boy. Later Will talked to the boy's parents. They had noticed a drastic drop in their son's initial interest to go to school. Though they had asked their son, he had not been able to verbalize to them what the problem was. After Will talked to them they were very relieved and were able to address the problem with their son, with the teachers at school and work out some solutions.

Certainly, we each need caring parents and family. No matter how good our family support, however, we each need a larger, caring intergenerational network. If we do not have good, healthy family support, then our need is even larger for a caring intergenerational network. A healthy network is intergenerational. We each need to be in touch with mentoring elders. We each need to be in touch with children. Having a healthy intergenerational mix enlivens any group and each person, young or old, that participates in it.

Another positive intergenerational activity that works well is having "adopted grandparents." The children's worship organized by Margret Good and a supporting committee at Bangor Liberty Friends uses this activity to keep the children and the older generation mixing in healthy ways. Every older person in the church whether married, whether parents and grandparents, whether widowed or whether single is adopted by one or more of the children in the church. On holidays and special times through the year the children send hand made notes and little gifts to their adopted grandparent. The people who receive these from the children really appreciate being remembered in a personal way and respond back to the children. They each get to know the other better, visiting and exchanging more with each other.



Whether a rural church and community has children or not, one positive way of targeting the older generation is to have senior citizen's fellowships. Dale and Corinne Martin have taken on organizing this ministry for us at Bangor Liberty Friends. They have found it best to keep it informal. Most of that generation are now only fixing meals for two and many of them, now living alone, for only one. They like coming to the "pot luck" meals, each bringing something, which gives them lots of variety shared with others. Birthdays and anniversaries are recognized. There is a devotional and prayer time remembering their concerns. At times there is a program of interest but never any pressure to scrounge up programs or work hard. "That's what works for us," says the group, "keeping everything simple." They have a growing interdenominational group with new folk coming regularly. In the group they share old stories and new ideas. Some hurry away to work after lunch. Some stay and play games for several hours in the afternoon. It's relaxed and meeting needs of people whose lives are getting lonelier as they grow older.

The senior citizen's fellowship brings different age groups within the older set together as well as reducing rural isolation. It does, too, bring this group into regular personal contact with the pastor and others who happen to be in the church who are always invited to participate in the dinners. Some of the group bring their grandchildren along with them who enjoy the cooking. The best and most experienced cooks and pie makers in the area will be at this gathering with their goodies. Word is getting out, if you want to eat really good cooking, don't miss this group's dinner!

There are many other activities that could be suggested to help create an intergenerational mix in a church and community: Groups where elders pass on information about how to live with less and yet be satisfied and happy; groups that share information about gardening, canning; and the list could go on.

### **5.6(b) Secular Grassroots Development Projects**

Adapted from Flora et al., *From the Grassroots: Profiles of 103 Rural Self-Development Projects*, USDA Economic Research Service, 1991.

| Type of Project                              | Focus                                                                | Example                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Agricultural marketing organizations         | Joint sales/job generation in related processing                     | Vegetable growers cooperative; herb-growers' coop/processing plant                              |
| Community-owned enterprises/land trusts      | Save declining retail/industrial firms; improve community services   | Communally owned stores, hydroponics businesses, restaurants, recreational facilities           |
| Revolving loan funds                         | Create investment capital                                            | Business, energy, land improvement projects                                                     |
| School-based enterprises                     | Use educational facilities as development focus                      | Hydroponic ag projects, stores                                                                  |
| Worker-owned firms                           | Crafts associations to market work; save manufacturing, stores, etc. | Wholesale/retail crafts manufacturing, sales; textile plant, etc.                               |
| Incubators/small business assistance centers | New job generation; entrepreneurship                                 | Revitalizing old plants; using old school facilities, etc. - shared marketing/technical support |
| Locally controlled industrial development    | Industrial parks, attracting new businesses                          | Raising investment capital, marketing sites                                                     |
| Business retention/expansion                 | Surveys, assistance, recognition to retain firms                     | Pride "fairs"; needs surveys; recognition activities; incentives                                |
| Value-added businesses                       | Building on traditional strengths to add jobs                        | Wool processing plant; grain milling; food processing                                           |
| Downtown revitalization                      | Save decaying infrastructure, firms                                  | Facelifts; new sales/ product strategies; mini-malls                                            |
| Tourism; recreation; festivals; etc.         | Income-generating cultural activities                                | Theme events; historical preservation, etc.                                                     |

(Agria & Jung, 1994, pg. 241)

Beyond suggesting ideas to generate an intergenerational mix, however, the goal of my project is to help the reader see the importance of targeting efforts and of investing energy to bring new life to their area. How are targets selected? That goes back to chapter four where the need for visitation and community contacts were emphasized. The targets should be established, (as in each living example that was given previously,) by carefully listening to people in an area and by "synergistic,"\* people-participative group discussion to launch caring efforts toward the target. (\*from chap. 5, "Communication Dialoguing.")

New life is being born in parts of the heartland! It is possible! A growing new generation is being spawned. In this chapter we have seen living examples of people young and old who are bringing new life to their church and community. Some of us are refusing to drift down stream and die. From deep inside us comes the natural desire to spawn new life. To do so requires a tremendous surge of effort up stream, timing our efforts, resting, pooling, then surging forward again. This process, though requiring tremendous energy, is enlivening. It is a miracle! To receive life from the Word, to invest our life to see others reborn, brings life back to us again. It is the miracle of the Word bringing new life to all those who will lose their life for Him and for others. "Whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it; and whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's shall save it" (Lu. 17:33; Mr. 8:35).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### MAKING A COMMITMENT FROM, FOR AND TO THE HEARTLAND

In their text on organizational behavior Shani and Lau identify the key element which is "intrinsic to the motivation" of any organization whether it would be a church, a community organization or a business. This key element that is so essential for organizational motivation is "commitment." Shani and Lau, along with others in research, have established "there is a direct connection between the level of commitment and motivation to engage in creative behaviors" (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. M15-3).

Commitment is not a popular word in our present culture. Making commitments is not popular and making long-term commitment is even less popular. Today in our society we tend to be comit-phobic.

For there to be a thriving rural church and community there must be a new commitment from, for and to the heartland. For a new commitment to have the largest degree of impact on a church and community we need to respond together in making our commitment to the heartland. The focus of this section is geared toward responding and making a new commitment as denominations, as ministerial seminaries and colleges, as churches, as ministers, as communities to raise our voice and to envision a new future together for the heartland.

## DENOMINATIONAL RESPONSE TO A HEARTLAND COMMITMENT

Organizational behavior, decisions and attitude have a tremendous impact either to the positive or to the negative on all the parts of an organization. The behavior, decisions and attitude of an organization can create an atmosphere where new life and growth can happen within the organization as a whole as well as in all of its subdivisions and outlying satellites. Conversely, behavior, decisions and attitude can disallow for creativity, new life and growth. Denominations and their organizational decisions, process and attitude affect to a great extent whether there can be growth or whether there will be extinction of the rural churches which are a part of them.

Research indicates most denominations, "encourage open-country churches to merge with larger churches in town, which is **not** a productive road toward church growth" (Schaller, 1988, p. 13). The same study shows what most denominations consider for their country churches that are struggling:

- (a) Encourage open-country congregations to relocate to town; (b) organize new congregations by sharing ministry, yoking congregations together and/or by merging smaller congregations with larger ones; (c) cut back in the number of congregations and number of members; (d) encourage and help existing congregations to be able to attract and to accommodate more people.

The study continues, "showing that denominations usually choose the second or third alternatives which are the **easiest** for them to implement, and that they shy away from the fourth alternative which is the most difficult to implement" (Schaller, 1988, p. 13).

As denominations continue to choose the way which is the **easiest** for them, the way that takes the least commitment, the least effort, the least investment, the least personal involvement, then the rural church will continue to wane and to die.

"The pressing question for denominational leaders and agencies is, just how can they assist the rural church?" (Schaller, 1988, p. 14). Schaller again helps us with his compilation of the study of Hassinger, Holik and Benson, showing the most helpful thing a denomination can do is to "strengthen and expand the Sunday school" (Schaller, 1988, p. 14). Of the thriving rural churches, in Schaller's 30-year study "almost 100 percent of them maintained a Sunday school, while fewer than half had a choir, only one-sixth had a men's organization and 10 percent offered a youth group" (Schaller, 1988, p. 14).

Helping rural congregations build their Sunday schools, or helping them attract and accommodate more people requires a commitment of time, money and energy. It is the path of commitment that will bring new life to rural churches and communities, not the path which is the **easiest** way.

Other significant things a denomination can do is to provide seminars and conferences on small church and rural church issues. A few years ago I was privileged to attend a seminar on small/rural church growth provided by our denomination. A successful rural Iowa pastor whose church had grown and gone through a building program was brought in to share his insights with us. Some of the leaders of Bangor Liberty Friends attended with me. Several of the seeds that were planted in that seminar have grown and born fruit here in our building program.

Denominations, too, need to build rural ministry training and orientation tracks into their recording/ordination programs. Entering the rural ministry is a cross cultural experience. We would not think about sending missionaries into another culture without providing: Cross cultural orientation and internships; language and cultural education of the area where they will serve; and required continuing education in the areas they need for their ministry. Why would we think of doing any less as we prepare ministers and send them to rural areas?

Frankly, I think the way we are approaching rural ministry is a "sink or swim" policy. We find a lively candidate. Dress them up nice, celebrate their call and then walk them to the deep end, where the signs clearly say "do not enter without supervision" and then we push them in, nice looking clothes, fresh college/seminary degree and all. They come up surprised, gasping for breath, bobbing, their new suit and now-soaked degree not helping them a bit as they flounder. They are in way over their head and we as denominations walk away, smiling, waving good-bye as we say "You're OK, you'll catch on, don't worry."

Why are we surprised, later, when, we find out they did not like the experience, found a way to climb out and do not want to do that ever again? A few will climb out, go to the dressing room, put their suit and their degree where they need to be, put on what is more appropriate and come back discovering what a lot of us have learned on our own. You can have a bunch of fun out here in the "ole swimmin' hole!" In fact "there ain't no place quite like it!"

As denominations we should not take for granted that ministerial candidates are prepared for rural ministry. It should be the denominations' task, more than any other group's or person's task to stand at the forefront and require those bound for rural ministry to have the proper training and orientation.

Agria and Jung, in their rural ministry hand book, list another great problem for the small town and country church which needs to be addressed by denominations. One of the main reasons given by pastors for their absence as rural pastoral candidates and their exit from rural pastoral sites is the isolation they and their family feel. What can the denominational organization do to help rural pastors and their families feel less isolated? (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 61).

There are other important issues denominations need to address concerning their rural and small town addresses, some of which we will return to later in our discussion of this topic.

The larger concern, however, which is more crucial than any other has to do with the attitude of the denomination and its leaders toward its rural and smaller churches. Please allow me to get at this by asking you to consider some queries, Quaker style:

Is there any rural prejudice in your own denominational behavior, attitude, process and decision making? Is it easier to think about sending people with cross cultural gifts and aid to needy people groups far away than it is to think about the same kind of investiture toward the hurting, "third world" right in our own rural areas? Is it easier to think about helping the plight of our urban centers than it is in making the same investment to the greater poverty in rural America?

Could it be denominational headquarters, located to a large degree in urban areas and staffed to a large degree by people from urban areas, are overlooking rural issues? Could it be denominational leaders which to a large degree are educated in seminaries in urban areas with programs that generally do not include rural ministry concepts are overlooking the needs of the rural church?

Could it be denominations and their leaders are forgetting just who it was that kept the fire hot in the fervent growing years of the denomination? Could it be they have forgotten who sent their offerings and servants into the ministry and to the mission fields? Studies and history confirm it was the fervent rural church which has sparked the original growth of the denominations and their missions that exist today. Could it be now, as the rural church struggles, she is being forgotten by the very organizations and people she has mothered into existence?



Could it be pastors with a proven track record in building congregations usually are sent or allowed positions in larger successful urban/suburban churches? Could it be pastors who have not proven successful in building congregations usually are sent or allowed positions in small town and rural churches?

If any of the above are true, why have we allowed it as denominations? If any of the above are true, what part have we played in it as denominations? Could it be our organizational behavior, attitude, process and decision making are playing a part in the decline of the rural church?

These are tough questions which denominations and their leaders need to ask themselves seriously.

Driving down the road here in the heartland where I live it is often apparent rural denominational churches are being ignored because those who are making the decisions are often taking the **easy** way out.

On a positive note, it is heartwarming to see a new commitment by some denominations who are taking a good look at their rural ministry and how their organizational behavior, attitude, process and decision making affects rural areas. This new commitment is reflected in denominational decisions which are not easy or the easy way out. This new attitude and commitment where ever they appear are bringing new life to the heartland.

Personally as a pastor I would like to commend our Quaker denominational leaders both on the state and the international level. I have often felt their true caring response toward me, my family, our church and community. I have experienced their genuine caring in many tangible ways: They have visited our church as well as with me personally; shared in our services; called us, initiating prayer in times of personal and church crises; listened to us and to our concerns; and much more. In our history we as Friends have tended to be a rural people, so rural ministry

often comes quite natural for us. That does not mean, however, that all is well. Recently we have been reminded by Johan Maurer, General Secretary of Friends United Meeting, (the top executive for F.U.M.), about the "shrinkage among Friends" and in some places "you can calculate the days when Friends will no longer be in existence." As Friends we, too, need to make a combined and concerted new commitment to the heartland.

Denominations need to respond, making a new commitment to organizational behavior, attitude, pattern and decision making that will orient, prepare and sustain a thriving ministry in the heartland.

## **MINISTERIAL COLLEGE AND SEMINARY RESPONSE TO A HEARTLAND COMMITMENT**

Tex Sample, one of the leading spokesmen for rural ministry concerns charges curtly about training in the ministerial college and seminary:

I am convinced that those trained in the colleges, universities and seminaries are socialized into a way of relating to the world that makes them unfit for working in the rural culture. They are socialized into a way of relating to the world that makes it very difficult to understand the view of people in the rural culture (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 161).

Tex is not the only one pointing out this lack in rural ministerial preparation. In my research just about every author and speaker addressing rural ministry comes into chorus with Tex.

Many rural calls are multiple, serving two or more small churches, often separated by wide distances. The lack of preparation for such a demanding ministry

in our seminaries and colleges is costly for the pastor, their family and their churches (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 5). The rural church is not taken seriously in seminary. In seminary they present one way, a general way for all, that they believe to be good (Patrick, 1995).

Colleges and seminaries are failing to prepare graduates for rural and small town ministry. Yet more than half of all seminarians will serve a small town or rural church in their first pastorate. Since the majority of seminarians come from urban or suburban backgrounds and the majority of U.S. seminaries are in urban centers, it is easy for urban and suburban world views to exert a subtle but powerful influence on their education. Those prepared with this urban context enter rural churches unprepared and experience profound culture shock. They struggle with overwhelming poverty, the lack of options in the schools for their children that they are accustomed to, and with the lack of job possibilities for their spouses.

Often these new pastors have extreme difficulties in these pastorates, as well as personal problems, and begin to question their call. Many of them leave the ministry disillusioned to never reenter it again, or, they tend to regard the rural and small-town church as a stepping-stone to a 'more fulfilling' ministry in an urban community.

Not only do the pastors and their families suffer but the churches, in turn, suffer from this cycle, have a low image level, more conflict and low morale. **Rural America pays a price for inadequately prepared church leaders!**

Pastors must understand their context. Given that seminarians from an urban background will more than likely enter a rural parish upon graduation, and given the grim statistics facing rural America, the context of rural and small-town life needs the attention of seminaries (Rhodes, 1994, p. 94).

From the picture we posed as an excited bunch of newly recorded, (ordained), pastors entering the ministry in 1976, there are only two of us left. In 20-years more than 10 friends of mine who were in that picture are now out of the picture. There are different reasons which have caused the exit of each of them from the ministry.

Each of them, however, was involved in a rural church when they either burnt out, rusted out, blew up, or just politely, wordlessly left never to return to the ministry. When I meet any of them, to this date, I can still feel the pain radiating from them caused by their exiting experiences.

Are denominations and ministerial preparatory programs partially to blame for the lack of qualified ministers today in not providing a strong rural ministry orientation?

"How can we contextualize scholarly, intellectual training and religious speak in a culture where, 33% of adults over the age of 25 cannot read or write?" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 56). How can we contextualize expensive theological education in urban enterprises to the rural setting? Does our formal, expensive, urban training in many ways preclude the possibility of preparing and providing pastors who can *dwell* with rural people groups? Will they, on graduation be able to live on the same level with rural people? Will they be able to speak the language of the people? Will they really care, or will they just use this stop as a stair to step higher up to a larger church in a town or city somewhere?

Agria and Jung continue to share their concerns on these issues stating one of the biggest problems with seminaries is the focus on "liturgical correctness" that does not mean anything or is inconsequential out here in our rural areas. It can, in fact, be a barrier to true worship. Liturgies need to be freed up. We need to use it, not have it use us (p. 182). We can no longer afford the "elitist" denominational, educational, or theological structures we have created in the past. They may have been helpful and effective at points in the past but will continue to become less and less effective and affordable in the 21st century (p. 58).

As I was working on this project one of the draft readers who has been helping me is Deborah Suess pastor of the West Branch Friends Church in Iowa. She verified the research reported here saying:

"Earlham School of Religion, where I graduated, has many terrific gifts. Preparing people for rural ministry is not one of them, however. Like many of my colleagues, I had no idea when I was preparing for the ministry that I would end up in a semi-rural setting. This concern needs to be addressed and rural ministry orientation needs to be a part of the pastoral preparation offered in seminary" (Suess, 1995).

Along with the renewed response and commitment ministerial colleges and seminaries need to make, their students and graduates, too, need to respond more positively to a heartland commitment.

"One of the most distressing questions heard at graduation time on campuses is 'How much is your total package?' How do we, as Christians, measure success? By the size of the 'total package?' Or in faithful service to the hurting of this world?" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 58).

On campuses, rural ministry is often considered as a place where many pastors have to put in their time until some better opportunity opens up. That picture, which is very damaging to the heartland, needs to be reframed:

**Rural** ministry is **real** ministry--it is not merely preparation for real ministry in another setting. Rural ministry is not training for something better. Rural ministry is ministry in which one must use all of the gifts and talents which God has given to a man or woman. Rural areas need committed, talented, caring pastors--old, young, and in between. There are real needs to be met and dedicated Christians anxious to build the kingdom of God are needed there (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 110, 174).

Another concern which needs to be addressed by the ministerial college and seminary is that opportunities need to be provided in sites that make it possible for

rural pastors, church leaders and laity to participate in their seminars and degree track programs. Some seminaries now have flexible, degree track programs that allow one to study and sharpen their skills without forcing their family to move or leave the site of their call. We in rural areas need more of this type of programming.

"Seminary training needs to be provided off campus so that people do not have to quit a job and uproot a family" (Agria and Jung, 1994, p. 163).

Considering all these issues, Agria and Jung rightfully ask denominations and theological education enterprises, "what new models and changes need to emerge?" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 56). To the traditional Christian college/seminary curriculum they suggest making changes and additions to include "hands-on" experience in rural ministry:

- Field work assignments with accredited rural mini-courses.
- Voluntary, paid summer internships (for academic credit) ranging from one to six weeks.
- Unpaid/paid field observation work.
- Independent studies, paid and unpaid.
- Multiple semester field experiences.
- Supervised practice of ministry experience.
- 'Plunges' or 'immersions' (intensive weekend or multiweek live-in internships) (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 257).

Agria and Jung continue as they point out that our seminaries and Christian colleges need to be teaching: "Community development skills, gardening, canning, distribution of services--as well as church leadership skills" ( p. 58). Dr. Val Farmer, rural psychologist, suggests there be study directed toward "how effective small towns and rural churches get things done. Asking questions like, how does their leadership differ from similar communities whose record is not so good?" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 103).

Agria and Jung conclude their challenge for a renewed commitment to rural ministry by ministerial colleges and seminaries by saying: "It is important that seminaries be about the business of faithfully, conscientiously, and intentionally preparing their students for a ministry in a rural setting" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 173).

To the above it would be important to emphasize the need for "hands on training" in the skills of visitation, making people contacts and building a faith/social network which was emphasized in chapter four.

One of the intriguing, newer areas of study anyone entering or already in the ministry would want to explore, especially if they are serving or going to serve in a rural pastorate, is the area of "organizational behavior." Why do organizations and groups of people behave as they do? What can be done to motivate them? How can a group be more creative? What facilitates group "synergy" and growth? What keeps a group from growth? All these questions and more are fascinating to explore and are offered today in excellent course work, conferences and in printed packets.

There is good news to report from ministerial colleges and seminaries as well. There are ministerial preparatory schools that are catching a new vision for rural ministry and making a commitment in response.

There are signs of hope for rural theological education. Several seminaries, including Dubuque, Bangor and David C. Cook, offer special programs in rural ministry. Rural church people are beginning to press for change too: If rural-oriented seminarians aren't available, they want to employ clergy who are not seminary-trained, which are often better suited to minister in rural areas" (Rhodes, 1994, p. 94).

Dubuque Theological Seminary has been and continues at the forefront as a seminary committed to the heartland. They are the ones who have produced some of the great resources I have presented in this work. They have a graduate degree track in rural ministry. As well, they sponsor the annual Rural Ministry Conference with

keynote addresses, workshops, music, worship ideas, and lots of resource material available. I have gleaned much from the conference and from their materials personally and would recommend it to pastors and leaders of any rural church.

The Missouri School of Religion has refocused its mission and now has a Center for Rural Ministry. Components of the center are: "Rural Clergy Education, Rural Laity Faith Development, Rural Issues, Networking, Rural Community Revitalization and Rural Community in Global Perspective." The mission of the new center is to "provide transformative experiences which equip laity and clergy for dynamic Christian discipleship, leadership and ministry, and which empower rural congregations for ministries of community revitalization" (Center for Rural Ministry, 1995, p. 3).

It is exciting to participate in my present study track at Drake University and be a part of focusing more creative thought on our rural churches and communities. The helpful material for rural ministry which is being generated is growing. Let's join together to research, explore and discover ways to revitalize rural areas. Rural churches and communities need a committed response from our ministerial colleges and seminaries toward a thriving rural ministry.

## **THE LOCAL RURAL CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO A HEARTLAND**

### **COMMITMENT**

The local rural congregation, if it is to be renewed, must join in the response for the heartland made by denominations and by colleges and seminaries. A new response from the denomination, the college and the seminary are crucial. However, research shows the local congregation, on its own, can spark new life as they commit



themselves to a new vision for their church and community. "If a rural congregation is to thrive it will take a commitment to work at becoming a stronger community" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 238)

Another key question, is what can a local rural church do to keep from dwindling down and to maintain a thriving ministry? Schaller's study again helps us here: "Provide an office for the pastor that is accessible." Schaller's research continues indicating that "where rural churches have provided an office for the pastor that is inviting and accessible they have doubled in attendance percentage" (Schaller, 1988, p. 15).

In a previous chapter we warned of the mistake which ministers make in using their office to hide in. This is not a contradiction. Schaller is talking here about having and using an office for a connecting place with people.

A church or parsonage may have an office but is it accessible, is it inviting, are the doors open, do people feel free to enter and feel comfortable when there? Certainly there is the danger of hiding or staying in the office in deference to contacting and visiting with people where they live and work. Here Schaller is not saying the office is more important than the personal people contacts on their turf that was emphasized in chapter four. What Schaller and what the research is showing us is that we need to do both. For a thriving rural church there has to be the people contacts where they are, as well as having an open, inviting office where the people can find and engage the pastor.

Serving as a consultant for a rural church which was struggling and which wanted to turn things around, I made the suggestion, among others, that they needed an office for the pastor. The pastor had one in his home and most rural pastors do. I have not seen any studies which show it, but my personal observation and experience indicate that an office in the pastor's home will not usually do what Schaller is

speaking about. Certainly you may cite several positive examples, but have you ever seen a pastor's office in the home that has significantly added to the church's attendance? I have not seen a home office that can work as well for contacting and engaging with people as a well positioned and open church office.

At times in my ministry I have had to have an office in my home. I endeavored to make that as inviting as possible and it was used for conferring and counseling with people. No matter how much I tried, however, I have never been able to get the same response with an office in the home as is possible with a nice church office.

In being accessible, it needs to be close to the front and to the main entrance of the building. It needs to be approachable, visible and easy to find for any person who is coming to the church for the first time. As well as being accessible and open to the public it needs to be nicely decorated and pleasant. This need not be costly and is best if it is decorated in rural simplicity. There are people in every community that have gifts with interior decorating. Get their opinion, let them help you and the church to create a pastor-people contacting space.

Bangor Liberty Friends designed an office the people can see into and that the pastor can see out of. It is handicapped accessible and on the same level as the front door, requiring no stairs at all. It was decorated with assistance of those gifted in doing so. It has pleasant pictures and plants. It has soft comfortable chairs and a round table in one corner. It gets used constantly by committees, by people, by the pastor, by those crying and those rejoicing. As soon as you enter it has something to catch your eye and interest. The older fellas first notice the barn board shelves, the "hay mau pulley" made into a planter or the antique tools used as paper weights. They will usually not be able to resist reaching out and picking up one of the old

curved wrenches which were my grandfathers. As they do you can sense the memories and the feelings thicken and come to the surface as they turn the tool in their hand.

The ladies usually first notice the plants which are placed just as the decorator indicated. The tall one from floor to ceiling in one corner, the draping ones on the ends of the barn board shelves, the potted one in the 'ole nail keg under the window. Along with the plants the ladies usually notice the pictures that, too, were positioned by the ones helping us decorate.

The children usually first notice the teddy bears I keep just on their level to see and to play with. I have a special one that talks and helps them to talk about what's happening to them. The children also like the picture of the little girl holding the hand of Jesus and they draw me pictures of rainbows, stuffed preacher turkeys and such which I hang on a bulletin board.

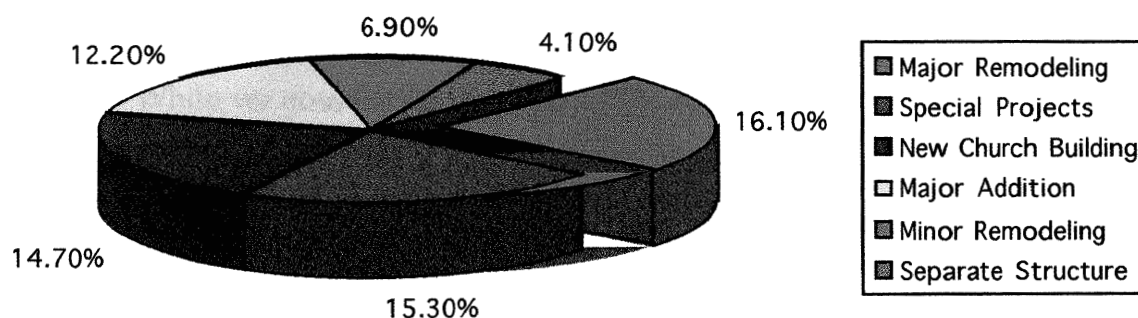
Of equal interest to the pastor's office, reports the research, is an accessible, usable kitchen and fellowship area. Like the church office, these need to be open to the people and "user friendly". They can be used by community functions to help draw church and community people together. The Cub Scouts, the Farm Bureau, the senior citizen's group all should be welcome. The church kitchen can be used for family fellowships and reunions. It's uses are endless so let it be used endlessly.

Brighten the church kitchen and let it cook up savory smells which drift to all the community. A thriving small town and country congregation know how to keep things a cookin' in the church kitchen.

After the church office, kitchen and fellowship area, next important, Schaller's study indicates, is to assess the outward appearances of the building and grounds.

How they are displayed conveys a message. Of thriving congregations in the heartland: Sixty-nine percent listed some type of new construction beyond routine maintenance (Schaller, 1988,p. 26).

### THE LOOK OF A THRIVING CHURCH



The "major remodeling" projects which proved to be the most successful to keep a church thriving were "installing accessible restrooms and converting the basement to classrooms" (p. 52).

Beyond the physical plant, having a church newsletter shows up on Schaller's list of important ingredients for a thriving rural church, as well as having annual services in a series for renewal or revival.

Schaller's study continues, showing thriving rural churches are involved, "on the cultural level of their communities" (p.93). In other words they, as a church body, are *dwelling* with the people! Thriving rural churches are oriented more toward the external environment (community and larger society), and are engaged with the secular world rather than withdrawn from it.

Agria and Jung point out another area which the local church needs to respond to, so they can have more continuity in their ministry. The leaders in local churches must go beyond saying they treat their pastor as a friend and invest themselves in forming an interpersonal relationship with their minister as well as to the minister's spouse and children. Living in a rural area often is very lonely, especially for those who are new to it and who are not a part of the existing network.

We who live in the lovely rural scene often say, "this aint heaven, but we're not far from it!" While we country folk feel that way about our area we need to remember that our area, so familiar and lovely to us, is like a foreign country to the entering minister and family. "Regardless of how you see your rural setting, many rural congregations are anything but idyllic way stations. In the small rural parish, the new minister is thrown almost exclusively on his or her own resources" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 5).

Here at Bangor Liberty Friends I am kind of spoiled. As I was writing this section my wife and daughter were visiting family in another state. In no time I had more invitations to dinner and supper than I could accept in four days! On returning my wife was invited to go with some of the other ladies to a style show that evening. It is super to feel included in a community and to not feel shut out. Sadly, this kind of rural pastoral treatment is not usually the case, or more pastors would stay in the rural scene.

Do not take for granted your pastor, spouse and children will automatically niche into your community. Rural communities have a certain resistance to new people though they tout being open and friendly. Be observant and make sure your minister and family are not being left out of the dinners, the sales, the invitation to the races, the town parades, the school functions, to whatever goes on in the calendar cycle of your community. Now, do not make them feel bad or guilty if they can not

respond to your invitations, but do include them. Beyond your church life is another level where you interact with your family and other families in the community. Help your pastor, spouse and children to be a part of that social network as well.

There are many persons who used to be pastors in rural areas. To hear them talk, many of them were starved out socially. Often they did fine as pastors, but their spouses or children felt isolated.

It is true that you may not be able to offer a minister what an urban or larger church could offer. Your school may not be able to offer what their children could obtain in a larger school. But rural churches, communities and schools do have much to offer. Assess your strong points and what you can offer.

Here at Bangor Liberty Friends I have been offered the use of several shops when I need to work on my car. When I have had car problems, I have been given the use of a car on several occasions. People of the church have offered my wife and I personal "get-a-ways" in their vacation time-share packages in nice places. The church generously allowed me sabbatical time after seven years of service here and an opportunity to do research in a study track, and the list could go on.

So often, rural churches bemoan all the things they can not offer to attract a minister with the skills to change their dying situation, when really they have a lot they could offer. Get together and assess your treasure. Every area and every group will have several attractive strengths which can be used to draw and to keep skilled ministry to build up the community.

There is one observation I have not stressed because it is not common in the research. But, there is data to support that local churches without a full-time pastor

and without the help of a denomination or any other group, can be very viable and grow. Those groups who do, have in every case, followed the same basic model of this thesis. They have committed themselves to genuinely respond in caring ministry to people in their community and are thriving and growing.

### THE MINISTER'S RESPONSE TO A HEARTLAND COMMITMENT

One of the main benefits and satisfactions of ministerial work in rural communities is: "Working closely with people on a personal basis--the people respond more than a sophisticated congregation" (Schaller, 1988, p. 94).

"As thriving churches involve themselves in their community, so their pastors are involved in community participation" (p. 147). "Ministers who reduce social distance between themselves and local people are more effective and their tenures are more pleasant. Furthermore, as insiders, ministers can take positions on wider social and moral issues without added critical attention" (Schaller, 1988, p. 169). In other words ministers need to *dwell* with the people of the area where they minister.

Can we live with less? Rural people are working harder for less, can we? Can we live with loss? Rural people live with constant loss, can we? In a society which trains us and conditions us to seek more and have more, to gain and to attain, can we counter that trend and live simply with less and with loss? "Instead of talking about a higher standard of living, we need to learn a new term--'appropriate living.' It is important, however, in our lifting up a simple lifestyle to not glorify poverty" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 119).

In Agria and Jung's handbook for rural ministry, pastor Dan Lybarger of Fisher, IL, shares about his life and ministry in the heartland as being described in the words of Charles Dickens, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." For the best of

## WHAT RURAL PASTORS NEED TO KNOW

Summary of skills needed for effective rural ministry,  
compiled by a study group of rural Iowa pastors.

1. Awareness that your approach must be people-centered (incarnation) not program-based.
2. Sensitivity to the need to treat vision, mission, and history holistically--you need all three to move forward, not just a past-oriented approach.
3. Conviction that this is a place you want to be--people to whom you are ministering, for the most part, want to be here. Rural life is desirable, not just somewhere people happen to be "stuck."
4. Respect for the history and tradition of where you are serving. That means sensing the dignity of the place--life is good; you don't need to change it to fit your needs or views.
5. Recognition that it is hard to separate public and personal ministry. To some degree you are always "pastor"--always "on."
6. Building inner resources to deal with the isolation. Even if you cultivate a mutual ministry style, in many ways, you are alone--emotionally and geographically. It is hard to share with parishioners. Your spouse will feel this as well. Sometimes the "little" things are the hardest...you can't go home on holidays. Clergy families need to learn to care for each other.
7. Learning to make time to take care of yourself. That means communicating that need to your congregation. It means scheduling activities and time that allows you to feed yourself--your emotional, physical, and your spiritual needs. (Goodness knows, the congregation will feed you a great deal physically!)
8. Appreciate the ongoing struggle of your call to a rural setting. Rural life, with all its challenges, problems, and difficulties, is an active lifestyle.
9. Ultimately, you need to recognize that your rural church will have more things in common with a urban church than it will be unlike it. Although the differences are significant, not everything is different... although at times you might think so.
10. Cultivate and display a sense of humor and storytelling to better express yourself...to grow, to relate, to share with others.



times he relates to the beauty of God's creation, the bright sunshine, smelling the freshly mown hay and fishing in the creek. For the worst of times he relates to the pain and anguish as a multi-generational farm is staked out for sale and the immense sense of loss for the family, the church and community.

With all of that, pastor Lybarger says:

I have dedicated my life to long-term service in the rural community. I enjoy the rural community because its a place where you can really be yourself. You don't have to put up any fronts. People enjoy laughing with you, they appreciate your presence in their hours of crisis, they appreciate your presence in their hours of rejoicing and they want to be there in yours as well. Often the rural church is the only viable institution left in a community. I see the rural church as remaining strong into the next century as initiative is taken in economic, social and spiritual nurturing and development in their communities (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 159).

Echoing this commitment to the heartland, another proponent of rural ministry responds:

For instituting a growth plan in a rural church, first and foremost, the pastor must plan to spend a good part of his/her life there. Don't get 'itchy' to move or uncomfortable and start to church shop or church hop to go higher, to get a better church. Instead, where you are, commit yourself to help the church be all it can be (Exman, 1987, p. 128).

The easiest thing for a pastor to do when he/she is struggling because of personal problems or having difficulty in the church is to move. The easiest thing to do when the pastor has conflict with people in the church or when there is conflict between groups of people in the church, is to move. Many pastors and churches have conditioned themselves with this escapist pattern. I became acquainted with a pastor who had just moved here to Iowa. After three years he felt "called to another church." When I asked him about it, he smiled, and said, "yep, I've preached all the

sermons in my file, now it's time to move on." He went to a church somewhere in Montana. I was surprised in another three years to see him walking the mall I was shopping in. "Well, howdy!" I said in surprise, "what brings you back to Iowa?" "Welp, it was time to move again," he replied, "now, I'm pastoring back here." Currently he is in some other state because he has moved again.

I guess, like the navy, some people become a pastor so they can "see the world." But that is not the way to really get at the heartbeat of the people we are called to serve.

The daring, challenging thing to do is to continue to grow through personal problems, getting professional help and/or getting trusted advice. The challenging, committed thing to do is to continue to develop and deepen as a person and as a pastor and to establish continuity in one's life and ministry.

Continuity and commitment for the long term, (7-10 years and longer), is key to see real growth in a small town or rural church. If we as pastors participate in an escapist pattern, moving every few years, then we will always be frustrated by and frustrating to those we are ministering to.

The people in our churches are not going to say so in so many words. But, before they will move one "tice bit" from their zone of safety, personally, or as a group, they will want to see plenty of strong evidence that the pastor is committed to them and to their church and community. If a pastor is moving in cycles that are less than 7-10 years and they are not really interacting in positive ways with the people and with the community demonstrating their commitment -- then they may as well be out in the pasture preaching to the wind! It does not make a lot of difference how good a pastor's ideas may be, or how divinely he or she shares, if there is not a real heartfelt commitment to the church and community, the people of the heartland will automatically know it.

If a pastor continues to share, preach and teach and never sees much change, then that pastor needs to stop and check their commitment level to the community. On the other hand, I have seen pastors who are not terrific preachers or teachers, and whose churches thrive and grow. What's the difference? It will always come back to the fact they genuinely care for the people, are interacting with them on their level and are committed to them as a person and organizationally through the church.

Cynthia Russ Ramsay says in her essay published in National Geographic's special edition on, Life in Rural America: "Rural communities and small towns are where I can leave a footprint" (Ramsay, 1974, p. 37). One of the many things I like about ministry here in the heartland is it is possible to "leave a footprint." Here is it possible to "leave a footprint" that can be seen and can be followed by the next generation. To "leave a footprint" we as ministers will have to respond by deepening, growing personally and by making renewed commitments from and for the heartland.

#### **A COMBINED DENOMINATIONAL, COLLEGE/SEMINARY, CHURCH AND MINISTERIAL RESPONSE TO A HEARTLAND COMMITMENT**

There must be a renewed, and a united commitment by denominations, Christian educational institutions, ministers and the local church to the rural/small town ministry. "If we are only willing to serve the educated middle class, we will continue to find numbers shrinking, churches closing and the number of seminaries and Christian colleges diminishing and even closing" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 58).

While it is important for each of these to make their own commitment to a thriving rural church in the heartland, there are many areas where all three need to coordinate a commitment for rural churches to thrive.

Of the areas where a combined commitment is crucial, the most important one, according to research and observation, is enabling the minister and family to reside with or to be very present with the people where they are going to minister. It will take a combined commitment to enable the pastor and family to *dwell* with the people where they are going to serve. Data from a rural church and community survey done in 2,757 communities comprised of 1,250 people or under indicates:

The presence of a rural rectory and a resident priest contributes significantly to the life of rural parishes and stimulates both the association and the community functions of the local church as reflected in a larger proportion of the population having regular contact with the church and in the church having contact with more people beyond the regular congregation. The presence of a rural rectory and a resident priest reflect a higher proportion of the population on the roll, attending services on a Sunday and presenting more infants for dedication. Rural parishes with a resident priest build up a larger group of committed churchgoers.

These broadly based and long term studies show that the sale of the rural parsonage has been yet another blow to a village which often has already lost its shop, post office and school and is seen as the disappearance of yet another community facility, seemingly sealing the fate of the church and community.

These studies show that rural people without a resident clergyman feel deprived (Francis & Lankshear, 1992, p. 97-102).

A study done by the Rural Sociological Society in 131 rural Minnesota congregations echoes the need for personalized pastoral presence with the people of a parish:

Sharing pastoral services is a common organizational response of churches facing declining resources and rising costs. Research, however, describes the negative effects yoked parish arrangements have on community civic involvement, denominational involvement ecumenical programs, financial giving and local church involvement.

Organizational adjustments made, facing situations of scarcity, often limit the church's and communities involvement. The typical organizational response to scarce resources has been for two or more churches to share the services of a single minister. Yoking is the most common way among the Catholic, the Lutheran Church of America, the Missouri Synod Lutheran, the Methodist, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian and the Episcopal churches to deal with small town and country churches. Though, there are many others who have yoked churches as well. In each area of the study yoked church organizations demonstrated diminished activity, whether it was denominational, within the church itself, or in its community.

The primary reason for the diminished activity in all areas was the availability of the pastor to the congregation. A pastor's time in a yoked parish is limited and not available to maintain individual congregational identity. Parishes where the pastor maintains an office and a place of residence demonstrate much more church activity in all the tested areas (Cantrell, 1982, p. 81 - 89).

One of the prominent themes which came out in the personal interviews I did with rural people while researching this project was the importance of having a "full-time ministry" (Willits, 1995). It may be easier to gradually slide into a part-time ministry or into a shared ministry as finances and people wane in a rural area but the dynamic can never be the same. It is important for the denomination, for the church and for the pastor to invest with faith and with hope to keep a full-time ministry.

For churches that have already slid down too far and too long to have a full-time ministry, there are ways to get back to that optimum goal.

Several years ago my family and I were asked by our denominational leaders and by a recently planted church which was struggling to be their pastor and to try to turn things around. As I searched the Lord's leading and asked others to be praying about whether we should respond to that call, it seemed clear to me to pose them a question: "Would they, by faith, though they did not currently have the funds, pledge

themselves to full-time support and a full-time ministry?" If they would make that pledge then we would serve them on a shoestring salary. They made the commitment and so did my wife and I. It was a commitment of faith made by both of us to a full-time ministry. God honored that commitment by both of us to that marriage and the down trend was turned around and the church began to build back. That rural church has had its struggles but to this day continues to have a full-time ministry.

As we have observed, often, the first organizational responses to small church scarcity is to pare down the ministry to part-time or a shared ministry or move people's memberships to a larger church in an urban area. That is too, too easy! Any group can do that! It will start a church on a down hill course that is very hard, maybe impossible in some situations to stop. Take, instead, the tough route. Commit to make the personal contacts necessary. Rally the people for the sake of the church. Determine together to keep it alive! It can be done!

This does not mean, of course, there cannot be a good sharing relationship between two or more churches. There are plenty of case studies to the contrary. There is also plenty of documentation to support the fact that rural and small town churches can grow with lay leadership and do so without a full-time pastor. There are churches with shared ministry and with part-time ministry, and with no minister at all who still have a very positive and powerful impact on their community. But, the weight of documentation for a healthy thriving rural church leans far in favor for a full-time ministry.

A study done by Iowa State University reveals when rural church memberships are moved to a larger church people will not automatically attend that church. Rural people are very loyal to their local church, according to the survey,

more loyal than the rest of society. They do not, however, automatically switch that loyalty to a yoked parish church or in the event of closure, to the closest viable church of the same denomination. Cheryl Tevis analyzing this study and writing in Successful Farming challenges such organizational responses to rural scarcity.

The taproot of religion is often found in rural communities where farm families remain loyal, more loyal to their faith than does the rest of society. It is, then, particularly disturbing when church leaders don't view the entire conference as one community, in which every church member--rural and urban--has a stake.

'Many rural problems result from organizational decisions that encourage urban growth and development' says sociologist Vern Ryan, who conducted the Iowa study. 'The assumption is that the entire society benefits from these decisions, however, these decisions strategically bypass small towns and rural areas and purposely focus on cities. State and regional headquarters of government and of churches are established in urban centers and their decisions benefit urban centers. Is this survival of the fittest?'

Churches were established to fill needs. Simply because one congregation is larger than another does not mean its needs are any greater. In fact there are serious social problems and pockets of poverty in rural areas. Can the Church address these needs with part-time clergy and clusters of decisions that affect beneficial change for urban centers and that ignore rural areas? (Tevis, 1995, p. 61).

In a rural church study published in the scientific journal, Sociological Focus, it is demonstrated that motivation and educational levels in an area are enhanced by the presence of a church in the community. This study shows the important sociological contributions of maintaining a thriving faith center in a community:

Faith practice can be correlated with educational attainment and achievement motivation in rural communities. The role of ascetic Protestant sects in particular the Quakers, Mennonites, Baptists and Methodists provide and promote literacy in the Bible and in secular areas which does impact educational attainment. Faith center communities have a natural work ethic as well which is a source of achievement motivation (Mentzer, 1988, p. 307 - 309, 313 - 315).

As well as losing the presence of the pastor and the parsonage "rural congregations often experience pastorates of short duration" (Ruffcorn, 1994, p. 71). This has been addressed in previous sections but is crucial to emphasize here again under the banner of making a combined commitment to longer pastoral tenure. Thriving churches and their pastors "tend to have fewer ministerial moves and longer ministerial tenure. Pastors are more likely to establish an identity between themselves and their church and are more likely to be symbolically identified with their congregations" (Schaller, 1988, p. 126, 147).

Current studies on pastoral tenure by John C. LaRue, former market research director for Christianity Today, gives the following data and challenge to make a combined commitment for a thriving church:

### *Pastoral Tenure*

| <i>Age</i>            | <i>Length of Tenure</i> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Under 30 Years of Age | 3.5 years               |
| Over 30 Years of Age  | 7.1 years               |

The long-range trend over the past two decades has been toward shorter tenures. As well, the business community has seen a decrease in employee loyalty and tenure. According to church growth charts the church should **not** follow this trend! Churches generally show growth after the pastor has been there aprox. seven years. In training and course work, seminaries need to emphasize more loyalty and perseverance in difficult pastoral situations. Churches need to exercise much more patience toward ministers, during the early years particularly. In denominational and in local church agreements and policy, tangible incentives should be included for pastoral longevity (LaRue, 1995, p. 56).

One of the reasons pastors change so often is the fear of intimacy both the pastor and the church often have. After being there for a while the pastor begins to find out this church he/she once felt called to has all kinds of problems. He/she also becomes aware that people in the church, in fact every family and every person, have some kind of real personal struggle going on. About the same time the



pastor is discovering this the people in the church are discovering that this fine, wonderful pastor they have called has a lot of disgusting quirks and some of his/her shadows are becoming visible.

When the above happens, usually after about 2-4 years, everyone begins to get a little uncomfortable. Instead of recognizing this stage, verbalizing it, seeing it as an opportunity for deeper healing ministry, a growing possibility for the pastor and parishioner, often, it is quite simpler and safer to move. This temptation should be seen as just that, a temptation. Instead of moving away, it is time to develop the relationship and move it to a deeper level. Like marriage, then, longer pastorates can develop and grow through deeper stages of intimacy, which will bring greater healing to all involved.

The courage to go through this inner growth process will, of itself, bring gradual, long-term numerical growth to a congregation. The avoidance of this inner growth process by ritualizing a pattern of escapist pastoral transitions will, of itself, nullify the possibility of long-term numerical growth.

Covington and Beckett in their book Leaving the Enchanted Forest discuss this topic. On the outset pastors and churches, like a couple falling in love, have all sorts of magical ideas about how things are going to be. When they begin to realize that their expectations and magical dreams were and are not reality, there is a sense of loss. It would be easy, then, as many do in our society, to continue the addictive pattern of disconnecting and looking for someone or someplace new so that we can retain our magical enchanted dream land. The trouble is, this is not real and the circuits we cycle to keep us in the enchanted forest do not allow for honest, deepening intimacy and growth.

The best way to stop this pattern is to recognize it, name it and to commit to "stay through thick or thin" developing and deepening the pastoral-parishioner relationship. This commitment will mean both the pastor and the congregation will have to accept many things they absolutely do not prefer. It also means they will find healthy ways to talk about those issues, to pray together, and endeavor to develop personally and interpersonally. Out of the development of that committed marriage there will be born new life and the faith family along with its nursery will grow.

"Effective leadership in a community often comes **only** after the people have gotten to know a pastor over a length of time. In the midst of so much displacement and uprootedness in our country, pastors in long-term ministry can give witness to the importance of connectedness and belonging" (Bolstad, 1987, p. 34). Agria and Jung in their rural ministry handbook "strongly advocate longer pastoral stays in rural calls" (1994, p. 163). Agria continues this thought in another published book saying, "denominations that encourage frequent pastoral rotation will have problems that are particularly acute." Agria, who is a rural church specialist, offered to help one country church with a renewal program, but the congregation expressed reluctance to commit because the church was staffed by an ever-changing stream of student pastors. In another church Agria found that to the parishioners, the word "**pastor**" was synonymous with "**transient**", so it was difficult for the people to invest in the idea of long-term renewal not knowing if their pastor would stand with them through the effort (Agria, 1995, p. 10, 25, 35).

The best manual I have ever seen for pastors and churches which want to make a commitment to a long-term ministry is inexpensive, produced by the Alban Institute, entitled, New Visions for the Long Pastorate. This manual summarizes findings, case studies and testimonials from long-term studies of lengthy pastoral stays. They describe the advantage and the risk of a longer pastorate; list

the factors that make long pastorates possible; discuss the issues that involve the pastor's spouse and family; and include tests and measuring instruments for pastors, pastor's spouses and for the church to use to form a long-term commitment together. They summarize:

As a team we heartily affirm long pastorates and invite those engaged in them to work hard to overcome potential disadvantages. In no way, however, do we imply this is easy work. It requires vigilance, skill and, occasionally, the use of outside resources. In many ways, maintaining a healthy long pastorate is more difficult than changing pastorates every few years. Clergy can dazzle and even fool a congregation over shorter periods. Many simply repeat what is in their bag of tricks and then away they go.

In a long pastorate, people get to know their clergy very well, both their assets and their liabilities. These clergy need to be genuine, authentic persons who live by what they preach and advocate, or, to the detriment of their ministry, they are soon found out.

It is infinitely easier to be the spiritual mentor of people over the short haul than over the long haul. In a long pastorate, clergy soon exhaust whatever wisdom or knowledge they brought to the scene and must continue to scramble to grow personally or end up repeating themselves and boring others.

Those who do grow, who do monitor the disadvantages of a long pastorate, will be likely to have a ministry that is very rewarding and fulfilling. They can experience a closeness and intimacy with people that comes only with time. Their pastoral interventions can have this long term perspective. They know how far their people and church have stretched and grown and how much further they can be challenged to greater maturity. They know when to call people to rest and when to press for new spurts of development. Their sense of timing is keener than those in shorter pastorates. We continue to be impressed with the fact that all the disadvantages or hazards of a long pastorate are surmountable, yet few of the advantages of a long pastorate are available to clergy present in a parish for only a short period of time. There are so many advantages to long pastorates that struggling with their hazards or pitfalls is well worth while.

Most churches will not experience any major spurt in growth until the pastor has been there for a minimum of five to eight years. Most significant growth happens when a pastor has been in place at least ten years. It takes this amount of time to gain credibility, trust and knowledge necessary for such major growth.

In a period of time when stress and instability are the daily reality of people's lives; today when people are so mobile, we need pastors who are models of stability and who have formed long-time, trusted and caring friendships in their parish (Oswald, Hinand, Hobgood & Lloyd, 1994, p. 87, 88).

One important factor which fostered the creative atmosphere that produced the "Post-It Note Pad" at the 3M Company, referred to in chapter five was their turnover rate among managers and other professionals which was less than 4 percent (Shani & Lau, 1996, p. Ma5-3).

One of the problems which needs to be addressed by all the participants in rural ministry, especially as pastors and churches do buck the trend and endeavor to establish longer pastorates, is the problem of "sameness." Mahlon Macy, retired pastor and superintendent among Friends and still serving as a lay leader and elder for North West Yearly Meeting of Friends names the problem of "sameness."

It's important for pastors to stay in an area ministering long-term, but they and the church must then be careful of sameness. It is because of sameness that pastors and churches become ineffective. To keep sameness from creeping in and fossilizing a person or group there needs to be flexibility, growing and careful listening to those in the community around us.

Pastors continually need new illustrations, new windows and they need to be painting new word pictures. This will take staying in touch with the people, study, development, professional and personal growth.

Churches need to offer sabbatical and study track time to help a pastor and themselves to be growing beyond sameness that constantly is creeping into a person and a church (Macy, 1995).

Concerning a combined commitment, Agria and Jung report some denominations are making new and concerted resolutions on rural ministry.

In a vision statement of hope the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, in its church wide assembly on August 28, 1993 in Kansas City, MO adopted this resolution:

Where as this church needs to recruit ordained and lay leaders who will see rural ministry as an opportunity for service and will make long-term commitments to this ministry, be it resolved, that this church should

1. Affirm its commitment to ministries in the rural setting;
2. Assist congregations to move beyond independence toward better communication and cooperation among ministries in related communities, including ecumenical possibilities.
3. Through its seminaries, use instruction by extension and other methods as ways for developing pastors and lay leaders in rural ministry.
4. Through its synods develop laity training and other resources to these ends.
5. Assist multi-point congregations.
6. Foster rural community-economic development (Agria and Jung, 1994, p. 65).

Agria and Jung continue reporting that the Presbyterian Church "calls for rural pastors, church leaders and laity to be community leaders; to articulate hope and lead the people toward a positive vision of mission; and for the pastor to build team ministry with the laity" (p. 66, 67).

The Roman Catholic Church has set:

Guidelines For Political Action - Lobby to limit subsidies that favor large landholders at the expense of moderate-sized family farms; the reform of tax policies that encourage similar trends; to redirect research toward small and medium-sized farm productivity; protect wage levels;

For Farmers - To counter the temptation to individualism by a determined movement toward solidarity in a community; to approach farming in a cooperative way, working with other farmers in the purchase of supplies and equipment and in the marketing of produce. It is not necessary for every farmer to be in competition against every other farmer.

For the Church - To, with a special call, serve the poor, the sick and the marginalized, thereby becoming a true sign of the church's mission. Through true charity lead in advocacy. Yet, charity alone is not a corrective to economic ills. Grass-roots efforts by the people and by the poor themselves, helped by community, are indispensable (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 67).

This report continues showing the United Church of Christ has made a pronouncement to "strengthen the church with small membership" (p. 68).

The United Methodist Church, too, has a new policy to renew rural/small town congregations:

1. To mend the brokenness of community life in the rural U.S.A.
2. To strengthen its ministry in the rural U.S.A.
3. To encourage seminaries to develop much stronger and more specific programs for equipping ministers to be pastors in rural settings.
4. To encourage bishops and cabinets to greatly lengthen the tenure of ministers in rural areas, and to encourage the local church to discover ways in which it can cooperate in such a process so that tenure is long enough to build the trust and understanding necessary to become **pastors in the community**, (with a minimum of four years), to provide more stability in rural areas. To place more missions, cross cultural and church planting personnel in rural ministry.
5. To analyze the needs of rural communities and respond to them.
6. Urge every United Methodist church to study the plight of the farmer.
7. To become involved in ecumenical ministry and encourage sharing.
8. To encourage bridge building between urban and rural congregations through visitation and pulpit, as well as people group exchange.
9. Districts are to strengthen their support to rural areas.
10. Conferences are to analyze their rural crisis response and provide funding for an effective and ongoing response; place personnel in order to respond to rural needs; become public policy advocates speaking out, creating awareness and understanding, attempting to bring positive change; be in partnership with seminaries to develop programs to equip ministers to serve in

rural areas; develop programs to invest foundation's funds in rural economic development; discover ways to enable the ownership of farmland.

11. To use its seminaries preparing clergy to be more effective *pastors* in rural areas. To use the 'missionary training' model to accustom ministers to the rural language, lifestyle and culture.
12. To recognize Rural Life Sunday as a special day in the church year.
13. To carefully analyze and monitor all church agencies' programs to insure sensitivity to the present rural crisis.
14. To use significant portions of investment funds of all church agencies in local church based community economic development in rural areas.
15. Adjust the work load of superintendents to provide more time to be a pastor to pastors in rural areas" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 70).

Several of my draft readers said to the previous pronouncements: "That all sounds great but why aren't we seeing any of those denomination's renewed commitment to their dying rural churches here in our area?" Good question. Could it be it will take a period of time for these fine words to become tangible here in the heartland? Or, could it be it is easy to sit in meetings and put words to fine documents and then go on without really making any changes? Denominations often are guilty of the pattern we have observed, ritualizing words to make themselves feel better, then proceeding on without really making any changes.

The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion describes the need for denominations, ministerial colleges/seminaries, pastors and churches to make a combined commitment to rural church orientation and development. Part of that orientation should describe the best entry posture of any pastor who is new or changing. The best entry posture is not to be carrying a backpack of preconceived ideas and of programs, no matter how successful they may seem or may have served in the past:

There is a distinctive and sociological uniqueness to rural churches. Proposed programs and variations that have the most influence on city, suburban and large town churches are irrelevant

or only have a modest impact on rural churches. In fact, factors that normally were quite successful for city, suburban and large town churches were quite unsuccessful in predicting or affecting growth among rural congregations. Rural churches have dynamics that are very important, but which are very difficult to capture using normal variables (McKinney, 1983, p. 63, 65).

New pastors and pastors who are changing will have to be careful not to enter any church, especially a rural church, with a pre-set concept of how things should go. A pastor may have studied about, witnessed, or even been part of a very successful program, but that program probably will not work in the new church. Basically because the program is not from the people themselves and they do not own it. The best entry posture for a new or changing pastor is to enter, listening, observing and very caring. Programs that will work successfully in time will come out of the people's participation and personal sharing.

Lowell Bolstad, rural advocate, speaks to the concern for having ministerial training and continuing education programs by denominations, seminaries and colleges: "Rural awareness seminars which give perspective are needed. We do not need to worry about bringing in the experts from far away. We have experts right in our rural areas who can help our pastors minister more effectively. Presenters can include farm families and rural pastors of growing congregations" (Bolstad, 1990, p. 37).

If we would approach rural ministry with the mission model many of our mission organizations have formed over the years we would see a turn around in the declining rural church. Rural churches need ministers and leaders with cross cultural skills and who are church planters. To turn a down trend around requires much more effort and skill than initiating a brand new church or mission.

This training and orientation is possible without a great deal of expense. As Bolstad said above, we have the rural people in our midst who can inform us of what



is needed. As well, most of our churches, whether denominational or independent, have mission training programs which can be used as models. These cross cultural models will work to revitalize a rural church.

The cross culturally trained missionary seldom initiates with new ideas or programs, but listens and interacts with the people, becoming a catalyst, which allows the people to build their native program and church. The church planting process starts with people contacts, interviewing and much listening. It involves prayer groups and Bible studies. It involves empowering the people to build their own program and church.

#### **A COMMUNITY'S RESPONSE TO A HEARTLAND COMMITMENT**

All of the principles which have been mentioned in this thesis about maintaining a thriving rural church can be applied to maintaining a thriving rural community. As has been born out in the examples and studies presented, a thriving rural church will definitely help to stimulate a thriving rural community. The study, demonstrating that a thriving faith center elevates the educational and motivational levels of a community, was of particular note.

Whether it is a Kiwanis group, a group of local businessmen meeting monthly, the people working in the local library, the Cub Scouts, or the Farm Bureau ladies, the same principles which have been presented can be applied to help keep a community group thriving. Despite the severe problems a community may face they can, if they will, pool their ideas and come up with a creative mix, responding to the needs in the community and networking to meet those needs and to reach out to others. Any community group, if they choose, can dialogue openly, share information and encourage people-participation as they work together on the issues which originate

from their discussions. Reaching out, bringing in younger persons, new families and making commitments together will keep a community thriving.

The local Kiwanis group in Union, IA does not want to merely survive but wants to grow and help build the community. They actively recruit, looking for potential new members and regularly invite other people to participate. They have prayer, read a Biblical passage and sing songs. They make their meetings fun. Their goal is to help where ever they can in the community, especially where it comes to providing services for children. "Kids First" is the motto. They have raised funds to help build a nice park, they contribute to help the local library, they help underprivileged families and children throughout the year and at Christmas.

All of this demands lots of money-making projects and commitment. This small town group has been commended on the district and the state level because, against the tide of out migrating people they continue to grow. Statistically they are one of the few such groups in a small rural area that is growing. A thriving, growing group has a lot to do with attitude. The Kiwanis group in Union involves women and youth and has programs for children. It is intergenerational and everyone participates.

The small town of Union, with one convenience store sitting on the side of the Iowa River, continues to involve young people and foster life in a difficult rural economy. A lot has changed over the years and the town does not look the same but it continues to be a center of activity. People meet monthly to discuss ideas to generate interest and to work together. They organize an annual parade that people come to from miles around with lots of fun things to do for children, women and men. This last year the Brownie Scouts organized the creation of a large mural which involved all the children of the town.

Because of the commitment to community, Union, though small, has a superior library. What they do not have they will get for anyone. Three years before the Marshalltown library offered public access to on-line computers the Union Library was offering public on-line computer access. This is all possible because of the commitment of Jo Bates and all the volunteers and donations people make.

Communities, like any organization, can choose to live and thrive, or they can talk about the good 'ole days, lay down and die. The people who make up the community and the organizations in the community are the ones who make the choices as to which way it will be.

There are other rural communities that have worked together toward development. Christianity Today reported recently about The Koinonia group of rural Georgia which has procured investiture from some substantial sources and is noted for a:

Three-pronged approach to living out the gospel in rural community building: Farming, rural industry and housing. While farming and rural industry are the staples, the housing concept has taken on a new life. They offer an affordable housing ministry by replacing ramshackle dwellings with new and modest homes, sold at cost. They hold the mortgage on the homes via long-term, interest-free loans that require a down payment of only \$750. To date they have built over 60 homes in the rural village and over 140 in the surrounding area. It was from the Koinonia concept in rural Georgia that the successful Habitat for Humanity was launched. The success of the Koinonia concept in rural Georgia can be attributed to the kind of commitment people have (Hard Times Down on the Farm, 1995, p. 58).

One of the big needs for rural areas is affordable housing. For people who are interested in moving into and making a commitment to the community, finding housing is one of the largest problems.

The National Rural Development Partnership has been able to aid some rural communities in the area of helping them to develop affordable housing for

community building. Their goal is to "help any rural organization combine federal, state, local, tribal government and private sector collaboration" (Miller, 1995, p. 1). With their coordination, groups like the, Missouri Rural Opportunities Council and the Montana Rural Development Council have been started. See the rural resource section in the back for ways to connect with them.

### **A VOICE FROM AND FOR THE HEARTLAND**

"Studies maintain that rural Americans in many cases do not press hard enough for their voices to be heard" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 31).

In rural areas it is not in our breeding to brag or attract a lot of attention but to quietly continue on, observing and doing what needs to be done. Dr. David Castle, rural counselor and resident from Iowa calls this characteristic an "Agricultural Grace." It is a rural timidity. How can we who are rural maintain, honestly, who we are and yet raise our voice in the public arena for the concerns we have? If we do not raise our voice for this life style and place we love so much, who will? Personally, I would much rather go on my way and not raise a ruckus but who will cry out for the hurt and the pain, for the loneliness and the loss here in the heartland? Who will charge our governmental figures and agencies with the sin of overlooking small towns and rural areas to the deference of urban centers in their programming?

Sue Raftery who holds a Ph.D in Rural Sociology states:

"Without a voice the needs of rural families will remain forever unmet. Not because policy makers do not care, but because they are indifferent. They must be convinced to do the 'right thing' rather than to follow conventional wisdom regarding rural America and continue to just 'do things right.' The Church must become a voice for those who live in rural America" (Raftery, 1994).

It's a Lot Easier to Complain in our Small Circles Than to  
Campaign for Needed Change



**I hope my party doesn't win the election. That way I will have  
more to gripe about for the next four years!**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

Who will raise up their voice in the larger denominational level for rural concerns and promoting rural ministry? Agria & Jung suggest that we as rural people need to increase our congregation's voice (1994, p. 61) in our own denominations. "We must decide: Who we are and what we are and what we are going to do about it!" (Bex, 1989).

Tex Sample, keynoting the 14th Annual Rural Ministry Conference held in Dubuque, IA in the spring of 1995 spoke the sobering truth: "No body's gonna help us! Governmental policy and programs will continue to focus on urban areas. Church organizations and training centers are rearranging the future for a church effort where, 'big is better,' and is oriented from and to an urban center."

Tex emphasized "we must speak up ourselves for our rural churches and areas. We must work a network to build up a faith community in the areas that we love. We must not wait for the government or for the church at large to come in and help us, we must do the work and begin now" (Sample, 1995).

One of the spirited ladies who attends the senior citizen's group, Young At Heart at Bangor Liberty Friends says, "If ya' think you're too small to be effective, you've never been in bed with a mosquito!" Another clipping given to me by a person from our church which is from some unknown agricultural magazine records:

The Farmer's Association of Karnataka, India found their conventional protests against corruption and anti-rural policies were ignored, so well over 20,000 farmers gathered at the capitol and stood outside the legislature and laughed for two hours! Their laughter was so disruptive and embarrassing to the law makers that they tried to call in the police to disperse the crowd. The police commissioner, though enjoined by the legislators, refused to disperse the mob saying, "There's no law against laughing!"

Whether we become pests like the mosquito; whether we all gather like the farmers in India to laugh outside of capital buildings; whether we pick up a pen, or ticky tack a keyboard, we need to find ways for the heartland voice to be heard!

## ENVISIONING A FUTURE FOR THE HEARTLAND

"The problem is that somewhere, somehow, the small church, the rural church, the neighborhood church has lost its VISION" (Bex, 1989). Dr. Craig Bex, pastor of the rural Community Church in Kamrar, IA, which has turned a down trend around, grown and built a new facility continues:

Rural churches are dying simply because either there is no vision for the future, or whenever a vision is created, strategized or implemented, the vision is killed. We must understand that if there is no vision, if there are no strategies for tomorrow, if there are no goals, then eventually there will be NO CHURCH!

There are three things that are always characteristic of the churches that have no goals that have no vision, and that, I might add their actions are saying, we don't want to grow!:

1. You can hear repeated at any meeting, 'But we've never done it that way before.'
2. The pastor has been told over and over, 'Well, you know that Pastor \_\_\_\_\_ never did it that way!'
3. References to yesterday are always prominent, you will hear people say, 'Remember how many we used to have in Sunday School?'

Before goals can even be talked about, before a vision can even be seen, these three patterns MUST be broken (Bex, 1989).

"There has been a cloud of gloom over the rural church and it is time that we allow God's Spirit to blow away the gloom" (Van De Weyer, 1991, p. 1). While doing research for this project, I visited in a rural church where there were about 10 of us worshipping on a Sunday morning in Kansas. In their library I found the following word picture of a dying rural church in a book entitled, The Dusty Answer.

Ironically these words were not only in the book but hanging in the air everywhere:

The gloom has swallowed us up, no voice is calling, 'Oh come!  
Oh Come! There are no children to scold for running in the isle or  
down the stairs. There is not much left except for our memory and our  
memory is practically gone. The echoes in our hall come from the past.  
Soon we will all be gone (Lehmann, 1927, p. 93, 121, 209, 343).

Many times, just walking into a rural or small town church the first smell one gets is of closed in stale mustiness, decay and oldness. "One can smell depression and despair in the air. Trials and tribulations over time have robbed them of the fragrance of life" (Ruffcorn, 1994, p. 41-43). Rural churches that have hope and vision have more of an open air about them. Where there is a vision and hope there is the fragrance and color burst of flowers, there is the smell of some new paint, there is the smell of cleaning solution in the bathroom, there is the savory smell of great country recipes being blended, heated and shared in love, flowing out of the kitchen.

Bolstad, a spokesman for rural issues shares his vision of reality and of hope and challenges us to make a choice for the heartland:

We live in the midst of a crisis in rural America. There are two ways to look at a crisis. One way is to see the crisis as a threat. The bottom line of the threat comes when those who farm the land can no longer afford to own the land, and those who own the land do not farm the land. We must declare, **THE FAMILY FARM IS NOT FOR SALE!**

The crisis in rural America also presents another side. It provides an opportunity. We stand at a unique moment in history. We can shape our future for better or for worse. This can be our finest hour. Or it can be our worst hour. It all depends on how we respond to the opportunity this crisis poses" (Bolstad, 1987, p. 60, 61).

"What would happen if we would drop the myth that small rural congregations are inadequate and act out of the unique strengths that they possess with a vision of hope and faith? (Bolstad, 1988, p. 46).



Agria and Jung, who we have been following throughout this thesis speak to the importance of having a hopeful vision for the heartland we love:

What empowers a congregation to do the will of God? In a rural congregation it is not necessarily the pastor. In the rural congregation, what has to happen first, is healing. A congregation can only heal when it knows that it is taken seriously and treated with respect. What empowers is hope. What empowers is belonging to a group of people who have the source of hope (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 161).

It is healing from the *indwelling* Word of God that activates hope and out of hope can come a new vision. "Nothing will happen without a vision" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 163). Beyond the imperative of setting and attaining goals, the most important thing to be able to turn a down trend around is to have, Spirit (Lindemann, 1994).

After three decades of rural church and community research Schaller, with Holik, Benson and Hassinger the rural sociologist, in the same study which we have been following through this work, assert as they addresses the question about rural church viability: "Research indicates that rural churches are both tough and healthy. The good news is that our rural areas provide a fertile setting" (Schaller, 1988, p. 8, 9). "The frustrating problems and resistant attitudes toward change do not necessarily suggest that rural America is doomed--or that the rural church is powerless, static, or incapable of growth" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 29). The rural church is one of the most tenacious of all institutions" (Rathge, 1989, p. 73).

Churches have been less affected by the changes of rural society than have other institutions. While schools have fallen into disuse and business streets of small towns deteriorate, churches persist. In an era of lost services--schools, medical facilities, commerce--rural churches have greater importance as rural community institutions (Schaller, 1988, p. 40, 95).

"In many communities the church may be the one, single remaining public institution still intact" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 44). Rural churches can make a viable difference in their communities if they choose to. In times when more and more local control is being lost by rural communities, churches can play a vital and growing part. "Churches occupy a unique position in the community because they combine a high degree of local control with a connection to extra-local organizations" (Schaller, 1988, p. 162).

The question becomes not just one of saving farms as viable economic units or even saving 'rural life' as it existed in the past. The issue is not just a nostalgic yearning for green space or fears that rural America is destined to become a gigantic suburb or mass parking lot. What is at stake is whether there will be a healthy and distinct 'rural' culture in the future, or what shape that rural life and lifestyle will take in the years ahead (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 32).

Even for those who have experienced the tremendous trauma of farm loss and for any who question about the future, there can come new life and a new vision:

Roberta Hinman, an outreach worker and farm development specialist with Iowa State University Extension Service understands the plight of the local farmer. She has visited 140-150 troubled families in northeast Iowa during the past four years. As well, she has survived a failed farm and a failed marriage to earn a college degree, land a job and begin her quest for a master's degree. She reported in a public interview, 'there really is life after farming, and you can be happy' (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 54).

One of the families who have suffered farm loss in the Bangor Liberty Friends Church has not only had to endure the devastating loss of land but, as well, the loss of family members who were working the farm who had to move away for employment. Though very painful the path they had to take, they were able to reinvest in life. They have made the commitment to stay and work in the community and in the church. They continue to invest themselves reaching out to others in many ways: Counseling, serving on the Social Concerns Committee,

serving as an elder in the church, helping with church meals, serving on the Iowa SHARE Committee, (described in chapter four), involved in local and national politics, they have personally made trips to the inner city of Chicago to help in a mission there, they have personally visited other families and helped to bring them into the church, and the list could go on. Despite their own personal pain and problems they have chosen to reinvest and to commit themselves for the good of the church and community and their lives are having a powerful impact. They are leaving a footprint distinct enough to be followed.

Church and community leaders of the 21st century in rural areas must see themselves as 'servants of the people--not as 'specialized professionals.' They must be willing to work and live among the people if rural ministry is to survive and bring a liberating ministry of hope to the helpless and to their community (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 58).

What do you envision for the future of rural America? What do you envision for your rural church and community? Some rural sociologists envision a future where "rural shopping malls will become commonplace every 30 miles or so. This can be called the 'Walmarting' of America. Rural churches will also increasingly be on 30 mile grids rather than six mile grids of the 'horse and buggy days'" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 57). I do not know how valid that prophecy is, and Agria and Jung are not necessarily saying that is going to happen. What is important is that we endeavor to picture the future and that we, together, come up with hopeful ways to invest in the future of the church and community we love because if we do not they will cease to be.

Rural life as the Old and New Testaments picture it demands a high level of individual participation and involvement (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 183). A new vision of hope will burst forth as the moving of the *indwelling* Word of the Lord is given presence by a people-participative, "synergistic" group.

HOPE SEES CLEARLY

HOPE TAKES NEW DIRECTIONS

HOPE ACTS

HOPE SPEAKS OUT

HOPE MOVES TO THE FUTURE (New Directions of Hope, 1995, p. 2).

As we approach the conclusion of these pages, once again I turn to the helpful hand book for rural ministry by Agria and Jung who ask a penetrating question: "Why is there a tendency to leave our rural areas and go outside for jobs rather than promoting miracles that grow-our-own, one, two, or four at a time?" (1994, p. 253).

Continuing with this same theme:

Rural communities can offer a viable option to Americans in terms of life-style and livelihood. But if individuals within them take a passive role, rural communities of the future will not only be much smaller and many fewer, but much poorer as well. Rural people must tax themselves to invest in the maintenance and future of the community (Flora & Flora, 1990, p. 1).

Schaller, in conclusion, gives the top 10 indicators for a thriving church which are helpful whether the church be rural, city or in whatever country:

1. Intentionally attract new people and assimilate them.
2. Long pastorates.
3. Change of building and locale.
4. High commitment expectations.
5. Add to building's value by adding to its attractiveness.
6. Do as much funding for programs, public relations, and new ministries as for staff.
7. Attractive teaching ministry in Sunday School.
8. Emphasis on small groups.
9. Venturesome spirit not bound by the past and traditions.
10. Pastor who is involved more with people (Schaller, 1992, p. 34, 35).

Mary A. Agria, rural development specialist, has compiled several heartwarming case studies of thriving rural communities with vision. Summarizing them, they chronicle:

Successful churches have people with vision who have sought to transform their communities by incorporating into them the resources of their congregation--practicing community as Christians seeking to live out their beliefs about new life in times of change and transition.

Sometimes it was the church as a whole that took the initiative for that reform and revitalization. Sometimes a single lay person held up the vision. At other times, it was fueled by small groups of lay people working out their faith in a secular setting. Some of the efforts involved multiple congregations. In other cases, the church was the last remaining public institution in a particular community.

One thing that the successful projects had in common was the awareness that there is a connection between spiritual and societal renewal.

Parish nursing, of note, is becoming increasingly common in the Midwest as a means of meeting the physical as well as spiritual needs of rural people.

The impediments to the renewal projects included distance, amount of resources available, differentiating cultural claimants and differing pastoral priorities. **But the largest barriers to renewal arise from parishioner beliefs that renewal simply can not happen;** about who may or may not 'deserve' help or support; and if the pastor or congregation were prepared to see the work of the church as going beyond the four walls in real and tangible ways to reach out to others.

The most powerful signs of health in a church and community are commitment and having a community that gives people places to connect

Churches that were successful had to learn to extend their 'comfort zones' always further and to leave their historical baggage behind them as they worked through differences and difficulty. Often failure and blaming can become more comfortable than working through the risks and dangers associated with success. Often change was not a triumphant uphill march, but a start-and-stop, back-and-forward venture in faith.

Another essential element to success was ownership on the part of lay leadership in the churches (Agria, 1995, p. i, 1, 10, 14, 24, 34).

Conversely the inability to have a thriving rural/small town church and, or, community comes from "inaction due to fear and powerlessness which is deeply ingrained, that paralyzes the collective will to act. In the end, all it takes to change is one person who believes in a vision for the church/community" (Agria & Jung, 1994, p. 120, 132).

Among the hopeful heartland case studies included in Agria's book, Building Healthy Communities we find a demonstration of how one person's attitude and commitment can turn an entire community around:

The renewal in Oxford Junction, Iowa all began with a facelift. A former resident, retired and moved back to the town after a number of years away. It was Christmas time and as he drove down Main Street, he saw that the town had decided they should put only one light bulb every four feet on its annual holiday lighting string to save power. Those were the only decorations in town--no outdoor lighting on houses, no wreaths hanging on doors, and no visible signs that Christmas was coming to this town. He said it was the grimmest Christmas he had ever seen--almost like the story about the Grinch who stole Christmas.

The next year he was elected mayor. He went up in one of the attics of one of the old buildings and found all the old Christmas decorations. The townsfolk scrubbed them and put light bulbs in them, then replaced all the light bulbs that had burned out so that the strings were fully lit before they hung them up.

Since then the town has taken a new look at itself. The joint action generated a healthy attitude. It was this new attitude that caused the reawakening sense of identity that has begun and continues in the Oxford Junction project (Agria, 1995, p. 24).

Agria and Jung describe a thriving rural Minnesota church whose pastor said:

When I came to this congregation 12 years ago the church had not always been ready for change. Twenty years ago, the church was dying, but now they have decided that they want to turn it around (1994, p. 242).

Lowell Bolstad says of the rural church in the '90s, "THESE BONES WILL RISE AGAIN! Rural communities can be reborn!" (Bolstad, 1990, p. 1, 46). Research shows this promise quoted from the prophet Ezekiel is true for those rural groups with a vision.

Paul Potash in a ponderous 531-page sociological study done in several rural New England communities shows a "new rural history can be patterned into a community" (Potash, 1986, p. 160). The retired man returning to Oxford Junction was able, simply because of his commitment and his attitude, to help people in his community see their history and their community as one with hope and have a new vision. Others, then caught the spark struck by hope and commitment and together they rewrote their own history. So, Potash asserts in his case studies that where certain people have made a commitment with hope in their community and have rallied others to join with them, they in effect write "a new rural history."

The *indwelling* Word has been rewriting history in the hearts of those open to the moving of the Spirit since the beginning. There can be a new history, a new vision and a new future for the heartland!

## CONCLUSION

"We have the prophetic Word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the Morning Star arises in your hearts" (II Peter 1:19).

## HEARTLAND SONSHINE

### A THRIVING RURAL CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

#### Available to All

"The Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14).

When the "living, active, Word of God *dwells* in us -- *indwells* us and our community -- there is a new and renewing light and life for our time and for the forthcoming generations!

A thriving rural church and community is one where people are: (1) Dwelling in the Heartland, (2) Nurturing Life in the Heartland, (3) Responding from the Heartland, (4) Networking in the Heartland, (5) Making Decisions and Managing Organizations in the Heartland, (6) Developing an Intergenerational Community in the Heartland and (7) Making a Commitment From, For and To the Heartland.

Museums are OK to visit but who wants to live in a museum? Not me! I want to be part of a thriving church and community. I want to be part of bringing a newborn generation into our churches and communities. It can be done! Will you join with me?

The rural church can do more than merely survive -- **The rural church can come alive!** You get to choose which way it will be for your church and community. Your choices will determine whether there will be eventual death or whether there will be the stirring of new life. Which do you choose?



## RURAL/SMALL TOWN CHURCH & COMMUNITY RESOURCES

All of the books, articles and videos listed in the bibliography are excellent resources for any rural church, community group or person doing research. Many of them can be purchased or obtained in interlibrary loan. Feel free to contact me for more information or help with resources.

Behavior in Organizations, by Shani & Lau; the text used for the study of organizational behavior in the graduate business/ administration classes of Drake University and source for this project. See bibliography for information to order on your own, inter-library loan or from the Drake Univ. Book Store, Des Moines, IA.

The Center for Theology and Land; study, reference, conferences, classes, Sunday school and Bible study material and more;

2000 University Ave.  
Dubuque, IA 52001  
319-589-3117

The Churches' Center for Land and People; newsletter, conferences and other resources;

General Delivery  
Sinsinawa, WI, 53824-9999  
608-748-4411, ext. 805  
Fax: 608-748-4491

Farm Safety 4 Just Kids; material & help to organize farm safety orientation for families and groups;

110 S. Chestnut Ave.  
P.O. Box 458  
Earlham, IA, 50072-0458  
515-752-2827  
Fax: 515-758-2517

## Resources

### A Guide to Programs & Resources Available for Family Farmers & Rural

Communities; a thick notebook of resources, over two hundred pages long; from non-profit, local, regional, state and federal government agencies; from the American Association of Retired Persons to Women, Infants and Children, (WIC), Programs;

PrairieFire Rural Action  
550 11th St., Suite 200  
Des Moines, IA, 50309  
515-244-5671  
Fax: 515-244-6732  
HN1062@handsnet.org

Healthy Communities the Role of the Rural Church; a video produced by the Center for Theology and Land, see p. 216.

The Joyful Noiseletter; fun resource for newsletters, bulletins and public speaking;

Fellowship of Merry Christians  
P.O. Box 895  
Portage, MI, 49081-0895  
616-324-0990  
1-800-877-2757  
Fax: 616-324-3984  
E-mail: JoyfulNZ@aol.com  
HTTP://Kalmazoo.inetmi.com/cities/KAZOO/TJNOISE/TJNOISE.HTM

### Ministering in Rural Communities -- A Resource for Training Pastors for the

Rural Church, by Agria & Jung; a handbook and text used in the University of Dubuque's Rural Ministry Program and supporting source for this project. Order from, The Center for Theology and Land, page 216.

## Resources

The National Rural Development Partnership; with resources about how to get an A.T.M. in a rural community to Rural Affordable Housing to Veteran's Affairs;

427 Lorch St.  
Madison, WI, 53706  
608-262-9479  
Fax: 608-265-2853  
rdnet.wseo.wa.gov

The NEWSLETTER Newsletter; resource for newsletters and bulletins;

Communication Resources, Inc.  
4150 Belden Village St.  
4th floor  
Canton, OH, 44718

New Visions for the Long Pastorate, by Oswald, Hinand, Hobgood & Lloyd; an in-depth study by the Alban Institute;

4125 Nebraska Ave. NW  
Washington, DC, 20016

Paul Lasley; rural sociologist and professor at Iowa State Univ., whose hobby is rural churches and communities;

304 E. Hall  
ISU  
Ames, IA, 50010  
515-294-0937

The Prairie Farm Press; materials, lists of resources;

Rural Route 1, Box 199A  
Prairie Farm, WI, 54762

## Resources

The Rural Church -- Learning from Three Decades of Change, Lyle Schaller's published study is, regrettably, out of print. Professor W. Hassinger, contributing author for the study, Department of Rural Sociology, University of Missouri, was kind enough to send me one;

Department of Rural Sociology  
105 Sociology Building  
University of Missouri  
Columbia, MO, 65211  
314-882-3895

The SHARE Iowa food cooperative; there are other centers throughout Iowa, for more information contact;

515-673-4000  
1-800-344-1107  
Fax: 515-673-6042

The Small Church Newsletter; source for material, information, classes and conferences;

P.O. Box 104685  
Jefferson, MO, 65110-4685

America's Deadly Harvest -- You Don't Have to Die; Farm safety promotional published by, *Progressive Farmer*,

2100 Lakeshore Drive  
Birmingham, AL, 35209  
205-877-6000



**"I'm trying to cut back on the use of chemical sprays!"**

(Fitzgerald, 1988)

## LETTERS OF AUTHORIZATION

The next pages contain copies of the letters of authorization sent to me by the illustrators and groups contributing to this project with their hope to help the heartland.

A heartfelt thank you to each of these for their concern and commitment for rural churches and communities!

DON FITZGERALD  
240 E. MONTROSE #105  
WOOD DALE, IL 60191

April 13, 1996

Rod Routon, Pastor and Friend  
Bangor Liberty Friends Church  
1260B Hopkins Ave.  
Union, Iowa 50258

Dear Pastor Rod Routon:

I trust you haven't given up on your letter of March 26, 1996. It reached me today at my condo near Chicago. Thanks to the faithful work of the good people in the post office in my hometown of Waterville, Kansas.

We left Waterville four years ago to move to Chicago to help our daughter raise and care for her baby son. Our daughter and her husband travel a great deal on business, and they chose to ask the grandparents to help raise their child. The point being, that after a four-plus absence, the postal people cared enough to forward your letter to our new address. This could only happen in a rural mid-west town.

I was excited and pleased to receive your letter. The answer is, "YES. Let's work together to keep the sun shining in the heartland." For me, it is now a GRAND SON.

YES! use the cartoons as you see fit and let me know if I can help otherwise. The book was first created with IOWA FARMERS in mind, back in the days of the farm depression in the late 1980s. It is only proper that the cartoons take new roots in IOWA.

Two years ago, this week I was hit by a stroke! Although I have lost some things, my drawing hand was spared! I am still drawing, more and better than before. I still draw weekly, for a number of small newspapers throughout Kansas.

Let me know if you need anything else. Otherwise, send me a sample of what you publish, when the time is right.

Thanks for helping "Keep my Son Shining" even if I have left the rural community for the big city.

God bless you and your project.

Sincerely,

Don Fitzgerald "Fitz"





5-6-96

Dear Pastor Ruston:

Thanks for your interest in my cartoon. You are more than welcome to use that cartoon in your publication.

Sincerely,  
John McPherson





Communication Resources, Inc.

April 23, 1996

Pastor Rod Routon  
Bangor Liberty Friends Church  
1260 Hopkins Ave  
Union, IA 50258 9518

Dear Pastor Routon:

Thank you for your recent inquiry concerning the use of the enclosed illustration. I apologize we are unable to grant the permission. You will need to contact the artist:

John McPherson  
403 Northern Pines Road  
Gansevoort, NY 12831  
518-583-1809

We appreciate your kind words about The NEWSLETTER Newsletter. We would be pleased to have our publication's name and address included on the resource pages.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to call me at 1 800 992-2144.

Sincerely,

Joni Hendricks  
Customer Service

***Progressive  
Farmer.***

2100 LAKESHORE DRIVE

BIRMINGHAM AL 35209

PHONE (205) 877-6000

May 7, 1996

Rod Routon  
Pastor  
Bangor Liberty Friends Church  
1260B Hopkins Avenue  
Union, IA 50258

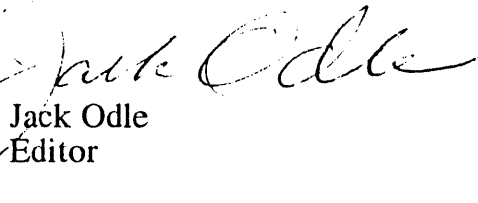
Dear Pastor Routon:

You have our permission to reprint "America's Deadly Harvest -- You Don't Have to Die", which appeared in the September 1990 issue of *Progressive Farmer*. Please use the following credit line:

**Copyright by PROGRESSIVE FARMER, September 1990.  
Reprinted with permission.**

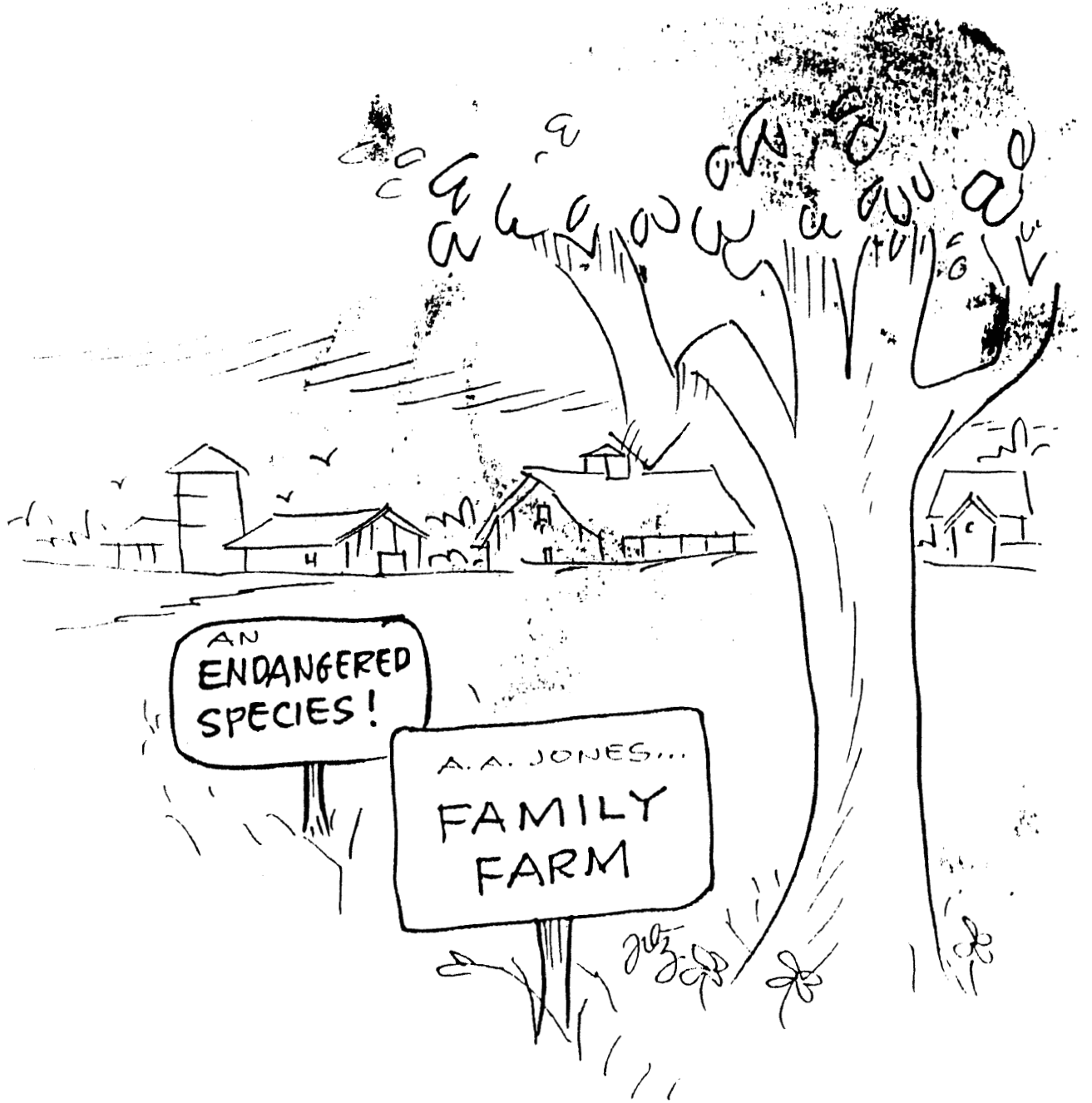
Thank you for your interest in *Progressive Farmer*.

Sincerely,



Jack Odle  
Editor

A S O U T H E R N  
P R O G R E S S  
C O M P A N Y



(Fitzgerald, 1988)

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**SOURCES WITH INCOMPLETE DATA**, (my sincere apology to the authors and sources of these materials. I felt them valuable to this work, which will hopefully benefit rural churches and communities. These sources come from clippings that were given to me by friends and people at Bangor Liberty Friends Church as they endeavored to help me with this project. Their enthusiasm and help is greatly appreciated, but in their excitement of finding something relevant to the project, sometimes they forgot to clip the full source title, date, author, or publisher and had already disposed of the original magazine or paper).

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